"LEFT HER HOME

A Tale of

FEMALE LIFE AND AD[redacted]

IN WHICH THE FORTUNES AND MIS[redacted]
CHARMING GIRL ARE NARR[redacted]

BY "ANONYMA"

NEVER BEFORE PRI[redacted]

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.

I. A GROUP OF CHARACTERS

II. HER HEART WAS FULL THOUGH HER WERE DRY . . . . . .

III. BELL DISAPPEARS . . . . . .

IV. A FALSE SCENT . . . . . .

V. THE ICE-HOUSE . . . . . .

VI. THE STATE OF AFFAIRS . . . . .

VII. THE CRYPTIC CHAMBER . . . . .

VIII. THE MYSTERY BECOMES MORE PROFO

IX. DAVID MANNING THINKS REVENGE IS

X. "I DEFY YOU, DAVID MANNING, I DEFY

XI. THE BIRD IS FLOWN . . . . . .

XII. THE COBWEB . . . . . .

XIII. FATHER AND SON . . . . . .

XIV. "SIT DOWN, CHILD; THIS IS MY HOUS I AM MRS. JAMES" . . . . . .

XV. BELL AND THE DRAGON . . .

XVI. A MAGASIN DE MODES . . . . .

XVII. LORD SHORNCLIFFE 118

CHAP.		PAGE
XVIII.	WHERE IS THE BURLINGTON?	124
XIX.	GOOD-BYE, LITTLE WOMAN.	131
XX.	BARELY SIX WEEKS	140
XXI.	A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH	146
XXII.	THE MEETING	157
XXIII.	A MOTHER'S LAMENT	164
XXIV.	DEATH	172
XXV.	SYMPATHY	182
XXVI.	THE END COMES	187
XXVII.	A NEW FRIEND	192
XXVIII.	LOSING THE "'ANSELL"	201
XXIX.	MRS. MANGLES	212
XXX.	GOOD NEWS	218
XXXI.	AN UNEXPECTED MEETING	227
XXXII.	AN AWKWARD OCCURRENCE	237
XXXIII.	IN THE POWER OF A MADMAN	249
XXXIV.	A BATTLED MURDERER	264
XXXV.	A VARIETY OF INCIDENTS	276
XXXVI.	MAKING LOVE	286
XXXVII.	FATHER AND DAUGHTER	297
XXXVIII.	THE RETURN OF THE LOST ONE	309

LEFT HER HOME.

CHAPTER I.

A GROUP OF CHARACTERS.

"THE whuts be a looking up, fearmer?"

"They be so truly," replied a good-looking old man, whose head was rich in those fine silvery hairs which are proverbially brought down with sorrow to the grave by disobedient children, amongst whom seduced daughters preponderate as two to one.

He was a tenant-farmer, and rented his couple of hundred acres, under a fourteen year's lease, from Weston White of Appleton, in the County of Warwick, Esquire, landed proprietor and banker—a gentleman who looked upon George Wilson, the farmer in question, as a perfect treasure, and a perfect thing in tenants, as his rent was invariably paid to the minute, and the agent was never bored with complaints of—"If you please, measter, that there cow-hus be blowed down agin," or, "Maybe, you'd allow summut for that there crop o' turmots, as the rabbits ha' been a eating up awful."

If a cow-shed happened to blow down in a gale of wind on Oak Tree Farm, George Wilson would have his men out directly he heard of it, and then one and all, with hearty unanimity, would put their shoulders to the wheel. New posts would be driven into the ground, fresh pieces of quartering sawn and shaped, and in less time than it would take some people to talk about it, the calamity would be a thing of the past, for a new shed would be standing as a triumph of decision and energy, glittering in all the glories of a coat of gas tar. And as for the rabbits, if they commited any very sensible ravages amongst the crops, a double-barrelled fowling-piece was soon put in requisition, and the intruders warned off Oak Tree. If the agent said anything about this summary mode of procedure, Wilson would reply—

"I be a good tenant, beant I?"

"Well, I've nothing to say against you."

"Well and good. Then let I alone."

And there the matter would drop. George Wilson had a wife and a daughter. Mrs. Wilson was turned forty, but a good strong, motherly woman still; as good a housewife as you would find on all the country side for ten miles round. Her dairy was really something worth seeing; and the money she made every year by her poultry, her pigs, and her dairy, considerably increased the balance that her husband had in Squire Weston's bank at Appleton. Their daughter had been christened Isabella, but everyone called her Bell. Bell was much better educated than her father and

mother. They had sent her to a young lady's school at Coventry, where she learned various accomplishments in three years, during which time the sum of twenty-five pounds sterling was annually paid in return for the scholastic training she received. The schoolmistress wanted her pupil to learn music and sundry other little branches of polite learning which are put down in a bill as extras; this the farmer would not hear of.

"I don't mind my gal gettin' a bit of larning," he said, "cos it's no more 'n proper as she should do so. She ought to write a bit, and read a bit, and do a bit o' cyphering, and know how to use her needle, but mong o' the piano-forte business for my gal. She'd be wanting to marry t' young squire and ride in a shay all her life, and drink nothing but sherry wine and them other forrin mixtures as is enough to make a cat sick."

So Bell got a sound education without learning anything superfluous, which would unfit her for filling her place in that station of life in which the farmer thought it had pleased God to put her.

She had left the Coventry academy now about a couple of months, and was verging on twenty years of age. In person she was very much like other country girls; fresh and fair and plump; as clear as a daisy and as red as a rose. Nevertheless she was universally considered to be very pretty, of which fact she was fully aware, and her good opinion of herself was hardly exceeded by that of others.

It was generally supposed by the young men about

Appleton, that she would marry Tom Thorburn, who's father had a small dairy farm of his own at Stoke Golding. Farmer Wilson had never discouraged the idea. He looked upon Tom as a hard-working, horny-handed fellow, who would make his girl as good a husband as he was likely to find. He had once gone so far as to say—

"If the lass will have ye, Tom, lad, I'll find a bit of stiff as'll start the pair of you. There's more in Squire Weston's bank than some folks thinks on."

And Tom would draw his horny hand over his eyes to rub away the tears of gratitude and joy. He was only an unsophisticated clodhopper, brought up at the tail of the plough, so we must not be hard upon him, or laugh at him; because his nature is artless, and he cannot help carrying his heart upon his sleeve. At all events I will not be a daw to peck at it. Bell herself had sometimes smiled upon honest Tom's suit, but she had never given him what could be called positive encouragement. She had, however, tacitly recognised him as her lover; and she had gone so far as to coquette with him in a clumsy manner, after the way of a rustic flirt.

Squire Weston, as he was generally called, had lived all his life in Warwickshire. His father had been a lawyer at Coventry, and died worth a good sum of money, with which his son bought Appleton —an estate worth fifty thousand pounds, though he had only given forty for it. But that was when the voice of Richard Cobden was strong and mighty,

and the threatened repeal of the Corn Laws, together with the Free Trade projects of Sir Robert Peel, made the country gentlemen and landed proprietors shake in their shoes. So he got the land cheap, and the children of the soil in whose family the estate had been for centuries, owing to an aggregation of unfortunate particles, were driven out into the world to work for their bread as best they could. Soon their name was forgotten, for a mightier luminary reigned in their stead. Weston White, soon after purchasing this property, started a bank at the neighbouring town of Appleton, which was successful as a speculation; and he was now looked upon as one of the most thriving men in a rich county. His son, Charles, went to Winchester, and from there to Oxford. He had just left college, and at the age of twenty-five he had settled down at home as a foxhunter and a sportsman. The active pursuits of life were not to his taste. He hated travelling, and resolved not to be a waif or a stray. The paternal acres afforded him all the amusement he wished for, and his father let him have his own way in everything. His mother was dead, and he dovetailed into the humdrum sort of life that seemed to be his especial predilection.

It was Tom Thorburn who had made the remark about the oats; which if it had not the merit of being original, certainly had the negative advantage of being strictly matter of fact.

The spring had been prolific in rain, which, together with boisterous winds, had beaten the crops down a good deal, and caused some appre-

hension amongst the bucolic interest. But, latterly, some fine open sunny weather had set in, and it was confidently supposed that the long-looked-for summer had come at last.

Tom was certainly the prince of chawbacons. He was as fine a looking fellow as any in Warwickshire, and some of them are strapping men too; he was, as near as a toucher, six feet high; he was stout in proportion to his height, and his black hair had a natural twist in it, which gave it a handsome wave more attractive than any curl. He shaved every morning; for he didn't care about having hair on his face. He was three years older than Bell, and the gossips said that when he took her to church, the building would never have seen a better looking couple.

Tom had been out hoeing all day. The weeds were springing up amongst the mangold wurzels, and, as he said, "He had had a go in at it;" and a go in from Tom, against anything, animate or inanimate, was not a thing to be laughed at.

"I be thinking I'll ha' a bit o' bacca," said Tom, taking a pipe from the mantelpiece, and some tobacco from his pocket, and setting the latter blazing in the bowl of his "Churchwarden"—a long-stemmed pipe.

Tom puffed away in silence for a minute or so, when Mrs. Wilson entered the kitchen or general apartment, which was always used as the sitting-room, dining-room, and room of all work. There was a parlour, as they called it, but it was kept more for show than anything else.

The huge chimney-piece, over the still larger fire-place, was profusely garnished with bits of string, skewers, and every imaginable culinary instrument. The extensive range, which filled up the large space, contained a famous oven which would bake anything from a dough-cake to a loaf of bread; a boiler of no ordinary size, and two hobs which would have accommodated the stock-in-trade of any three itinerant vendors of pots and pans. The grate had been screwed up close so as not to burn much fire; it was too warm for a fire now, but Mrs. Wilson was cooking something savoury and nice, to judge by the smell of it. This was for supper. The good body believed in suppers, and it was always a cheery meal with the farmer's family.

Soon the farmer himself followed Tom's example, and blew a cloud. When the dame perceived this, she went down into the cellar, and returned with a jug of ale, which she placed upon a table within reach of the smokers.

Country people as a rule do not talk much; any attempt at conversation generally languishes. Occasionally a bright and brilliant idea strikes a rustic, and he then gives utterance to it; as Tom did that evening when he said that the oats were looking up. There was no question about the truthfulness of this assertion, because he had verified the fact by ocular observation. This reticence has sometimes led me to believe that, from being so much in the country and about the fields, Agricola resembles his own sheep and cattle in the important respect that he is also somewhat of a ruminating beast.

"*Where be Bell?*" *suddenly exclaimed Mrs.* Wilson.

The farmer and his guest thought over the question for full half a minute, and then they both declared that they could not tell; for the best of all possible reasons, that they were totally ignorant of her movements.

"She do worrit me so," said Mrs. Wilson, "since she ha' been back from Coventry—and that's God's truth. She be gadding about lately a'body does not know where. I say to her, 'You munna do this, and you munna do that; and no more notice taken o' me than if I were yon kettle."

Tom shook his head gravely at all this, but said nothing, although his heart failed him; for he, too, had noticed just the least possible change in Bell's manner towards him. What to ascribe it to he did not know, but he felt it nevertheless very acutely.

"I'll be glad to be shut on her, Tom," continued Mrs. Wilson, "when she be settled like; she mun love her good man, and she'll be having her home, and her dairy, and pigs, and the like to look after."

"No, wife; you munna say that," exclaimed the farmer—"you love the girl as much as I do. She be gone over to Stoke Golding, perhaps; she'll be back to supper. I'll go bail when Tom takes her away, if he can win her that be, we shall feel like losing a sunbeam out of t' house."

"The day afore yester' she were out," said his wife, "and when I asked her' a plain 'Where ha' you been, lass?' she said summut about her having

Tom started at those words, and changed colour visibly.

The farmer replied—

"It be Mrs. Brown t' housekeeper as she do go to see."

The old lady went on with her cooking in silence. Tom would not remain to supper, but wishing the farmer and his wife good-by, put on his hat, and leaving the homestead on his left, struck off across country in the direction of Appleton Hall.

CHAPTER II.

HER HEART WAS FULL THOUGH HER EYES WERE DRY.

PERHAPS if you had asked Tom Thorburn what his feelings or his thoughts were he would not have been able to tell you. The mind is sometimes in such a state of tumult that it becomes almost chaotic, until the floating atoms are resolved into something resembling order, so rapid are the changes, that one fixed idea hardly retains its position for more than a second or so.

He loved Bell with all his heart. He had for years poured the whole wealth of his affections at her feet. He was like a shrub, and she resembled a parasitical convolvulus which had twined itself all around him.

The shades of night were gathering and becoming thicker every moment, but he knew his way blindfolded. He walked along in a rapid manner, which showed how agitated he was.

Oak Tree was not more than a mile and a-half from the hall; and he had walked a good mile when he came to a sudden halt. He raised his hand to his ear, and listened intently. Then, with a sudden spring, he leaped over a quickset hedge, and crouched down behind it, assuming an attitude very

much like what might be expected from a poacher when he hears the approach of a keeper, and knows that the pockets of his velveteen jacket are distended with the carcases of hares and rabbits. A minute passed—then another—a third also elapsed, and footsteps were then heard approaching. Voices also broke the thin air, and penetrated through the dense foliage of the hedge. Tom recognised the tones. One was the voice of Bell, the other that of Mrs. Brown, the housekeeper at Appleton. Mrs. Brown was speaking.

"I cannot go any further with you to-night, dear," she said. "You are not far from home now, and I do not think you need be afraid of meeting any one."

"Thank you for coming so far, Mrs. Brown. I can find my way," replied Bell.

"Before I leave you, let me impress upon you the necessity for thinking over what I have been saying."

"It will be of no use."

"I hope the contrary. Such chances don't occur every day."

"But they have other views for me."

"Other views!" repeated Mrs. Brown. "Now, my dear child, do be sensible; which would you rather be, the wife of a labouring man, who in his drunken moments might knock you down and trample on you, or——"

Tom moved uneasily behind the hedge, as if he would have had no very great objection to knock the speaker down and perform the trampling pro-

cess with all the pleasure in life gratuitously. Tom was an honest, simple fellow, but his ideas were not sufficiently refined to tell him that he was doing anything improper or dishonourable in listening to a conversation which was evidently intended for no ears but those of the two women who were carrying it on. He verified the proverb though, which says that "listeners never hear any good of themselves;" and his rather large ears got unpleasantly hot and red.

"Or," resumed Mrs. Brown,—"or become a lady."

Bell made no answer.

Tom strained every nerve to catch even the faintest whisper, but she remained mute as a stone. Presently she spoke, and her words carried some relief to the listener.

"Mrs. Brown, don't say anything more to me; you have had my answer."

"Well, well; don't agitate yourself. I shall expect you to tea as usual next Saturday, and then we can talk the matter over once more quietly; and you will have had time to think and weigh it in your mind. Good night, dear: God bless you."

"Good night, Mrs. Brown," said Bell; "pleasant dreams and sweet repose."

After this favourite rustic benediction, which is as hackneyed as the beginning of a country letter—for a country letter invariably comes "hopping" that you are quite well, as it always is good enough to leave the writer at that particular time.

After this Mrs. Brown parted with the young

girl, and they both pursued their way home as quickly as they could.

Directly Tom was aware that they had wished one another good night, he glided along the hedge-row until he had headed Bell about forty or fifty yards, then jumping easily over the hedge, he dropped lightly upon the ground, and awaited her coming.

The stars had come out, and there was light enough for Bell to see that some man had dropped down before her—from the clouds as it were. Stories were rife enough in the county about Springheeled Jack, and Bell was slightly alarmed. She uttered a tiny shriek, but Tom advanced to meet her, saying—

"Don't be afraid, it be I—Tom."

"Oh, Tom!" she exclaimed; "how you frightened me."

"Thee beest goin' whoam," said Tom.

"Yes; will you come with me?" She said this with a kindly smile, that set Tom's heart fluttering.

"I will so," he replied.

"Come along, then, they will wonder what has become of me."

Tom wanted to speak to Bell; he had come out with the intention of saying some plain truths, if he succeeded in meeting her; but now he had her by his side, and he had above a mile to walk with her, he did not know how to begin.

"What's the matter with you to-night?" asked Bell; "you are quite in the dumps."

"I be wanting to have a word with 'ee, lass," he replied.

"Well, speak away!" she answered, composedly.

"I love 'ee, Bell!" he blurted out.

"If you do, this is hardly the time or place to tell me of it, I should think." She said this a little coldly.

"Don't 'ee talk like that, lass, don't 'ee!" he exclaimed, tremulously. "I can't abear it."

"Don't be so stupid, then."

"I be but a plain fellow, Bell."

"I know that."

"I beant a gentleman."

"Worse luck for you, then," she replied, carelessly.

"No, I beant," he repeated, rather savagely. "There be gentlefolks up at t' Hall, Bell."

When he said this he looked up with a smile of triumph, as if he thought he had said something very crushing, but if his words had any effect upon the girl before him, he could not perceive it. She was perfectly unmoved, and as cool as she ever was.

"When did you find that out?" she said, with a light, gay laugh, as if enjoying a joke.

"Don't 'ee laugh at I, Bell; I be a plain chap, but I'll make 'ee a good husband."

"Husband! who's talking about husbands?"

"Well, I be. I love 'ee, I say. I've loved 'ee this ever so long, and I'll marry 'ee, Bell."

"You're very kind, I'm sure," she said; "perhaps you will wait till you're asked."

"Will 'ee have me, Bell, dear Bell?" he pleaded in despairing accents.

"No, sir, I will not—there!" she cried, in a passionate tone. "You have no right to talk to me

like this; you see I am alone and it's dark, and I want to get home."

"Thee woant have me, Bell?" he said, as if he could not believe his senses. "Come, lass, thee beest joaking, eh?"

"I'm sure I'm not."

"Thou'll say yes."

"Can't you take no for an answer?"

"No. I wont believe it, Bell. Why, I've looked upon 'ee as my little wife long afore you went to Coventry, and now you can't go for to say no."

"Yes, I have; and if you were a gentleman you wouldn't press me."

"A gentleman!" he cried; "dang your gentleman. I tell 'ee what, lass, I would not wish your gentleman any wuss harm than to be standing here afore us on that bit o' meadow land, with nothing about him but his two fists, and if I didn't give him summat, why——"

Bell began to cry, and stood still.

When he perceived this, Tom lowered his voice, for he had been speaking excitedly, and said mildly, almost tenderly—

"Don't 'ee cry, 'lass; don't 'ee take on so."

"You brute," murmured Bell between her sobs, "you b-brute!"

"You may call I hard names, Bell," he said, "but I could call 'ee summat as I wouldn't like the old folks at whoam to hear anyone call their darter."

"You may call me what you like," she said, drying her tears; "what else can I expect

you? You may do what you like—you only make me hate you."

"No, not hate me, lass; don't 'ee say so. I be but a poor creature, when thee beest in a huff wi' I."

"You may knock me down," she said.

"Don't 'ee. Come, now," he said, soothingly.

"And trample on me," she continued.

As she said this, the conversation he had overheard flashed across his mind, and he said, in an incautious moment—

"That be what your foine friend Mrs. Brown ha' been a teeching of 'ee, beant it?"

"Mrs. Brown?" repeated Bell, turning pale.

"Ay, I said Mrs. Brown," he replied, with a chuckle.

"You were listening, then, to our conversation?"

"I wor behind the hedge," he said, with the utmost simplicity.

I don't believe the simple fellow could have told a lie for a five-pound note.

"Behind the hedge, were you?" she said, bitterly. "Then shall I tell you what I think of you?"

"Now do 'ee be quiet, lass—do 'ee be quiet," he said, half afraid of her earnest manner.

"You're a low, dirty, sneaking—there isn't a name I can think of too bad for you. Well, as you heard our conversation, what do you think of it?" she asked, looking him steadily in the face, with flashing eyes and quivering lips.

"What do I think? Why I think she be a bad

"Mrs. Brown, sir, is much better than you are, or ever will be."

"She be a bad 'un," he continued; "and if so be as you are much wi' her, and in her comp'ny, why, I tell 'ee, lass, thee will not be much better nor she."

Bell became very calm at these words, and she replied, slowly—

"Have you done insulting me?"

"I aint been."

"Have you done?"

"I be done. I'll ha' no more to say to 'ee. God help me! I took 'ee for an honest 'ooman."

Bell shook all over, but with a great effort she said—

"Then perhaps you will leave me. I can find my way home by myself."

"Oh, I'll leave 'ee, don't 'ee be flustered about that."

And without another word he turned on his heel and walked in a contrary direction. His feelings were hurt, and he was not himself; he was half frantic with rage, jealousy, and disappointment. Bell walked on quickly, until she was within a quarter of a mile of her father's house. Then she heard a panting noise, as of some one behind her. Turning round, she confronted Tom; he was very red in the face, as if he had been running hard, and a good deal out of breath.

"Bell!" he exclaimed.

"Well, what is it? Make haste, for I want to get home."

"Forgive I, will 'ee now?"

"No, sir, I wont. I don't want to have anything to do with you."

"Don't 'ee say so."

"Good-night," she said.

"Thee wunt make friends?"

"No," she said, decisively.

"Perhaps thee will think better on it. I love 'ee still, Bell, I love 'ee still."

"You are very condescending, I am sure."

"I'll watch o'er 'ee, Bell, and I'll save 'ee if I can. We none on us know when the clouds may come round us, they may be coming 'round 'ee now."

"How tiresome you are," she said, testily.

"You munna be harsh to I, lass," he said, very sorrowfully. "I beant a foine gentleman, I be but a plain fellow, and you—you will break my heart, lass, thee will."

His voice was thick and husky with emotion; but she was outwardly unmoved.

"Thee may want a friend some day, lass; come to Tom Thorburn, and he will hold out his arm and say to 'ee, 'Better late nor never, lass; I ha' waited for 'ee, I knew thee would come; I ha' prayed for it, and God ha' heard my prayer.' You are like a birdie now, all white and pure like. You may come back, lass, wi' thee feathers a bit soiled, perhaps, but I'll welcome thee, I'll welcome thee, Bell; Tom Thorburn's your friend. Come fair, come foul, I'll stick to 'ee, lass, God bless 'ee."

Seizing her hand, before she could divine his intention, he wrung it heartily, lifted it to his lips,

kissed it, and with a deep well of devotion in his heart, uttered a sigh, a parting sigh, and ran away, that he might not play the woman before her he loved. His retreating form was soon lost in the darkness. She stood straining her eyes after him; her lips were parted, as if she would have spoken, but whatever there might have been in her mind, was never heard by Tom Thorburn. Then she turned round, and walked slowly towards Oak-tree. But her heart was full, though her eyes were dry.

CHAPTER III.

BELL DISAPPEARS.

EVERYTHING went on in a quiet, easy-going way for some few days, when a shadow fell upon the hitherto happy home of Farmer Wilson. Tom had not mentioned the repulse he had met with from Bell to any one. He contented himself, poor fellow, with burying his grief far down in his heart, and he sought abstraction in his daily avocations in the business of his father's farm, amidst the silence of the fields, but found it not. George Wilson, however, noticed his absence, and remarked it to his wife. Bell's manner was also changed, and her temper short and uncertain. Mrs. Wilson put it down to a temporary estrangement between her daughter and her lover, arising out of some "tiff," or trifling quarrel, which she supposed would soon be made up again. The farmer did not like the aspect of affairs, but he said no more. He remained a passive spectator of the events which were about to take place.

One morning Bell dressed herself, and without saying a word to anybody, went out of the house. There was nothing strange about her, either in her manner or appearance. It was her custom frequently to take a walk after breakfast, and come home

again about twelve or one o'clock, in time to help her mother to dish the dinner up, and perform other little offices which it was necessary that either her mother or herself should perform. It was a lovely day in the beginning of June. The sun was acquiring the power which it had lost during the winter. The birds had made their nests, laid their eggs, and hatched them, and the "bolchins," or young birds, were beginning to acquire a few feathers. The standing corn was looking green and flourishing; the grass in some places was down, and haymaking, with all its merry surroundings, was in full progress. The trees were in leaf, and the foliage was everywhere rank and luxuriant. Nature wore her most fascinating smile, and even a cynic would have been compelled to confess that life was worth having, if he had trod the little bridle path that Bell traversed on her way to Appleton. The day wore on. Dinner was over, and Bell did not return. Six o'clock came, and the dame became uneasy. She made the tea, and in a few minutes her husband came home from work. Mrs. Wilson expressed her fears to him that something had happened to Bell, and he could not help sharing her alarm. She told him the early hour at which Bell had gone out, and how she had not been near Oak-tree during the entire day. As he heard this the farmer's alarm deepened. His wife suggested that the girl had most likely gone to the Hall, to visit her friend Mrs. Brown. George Wilson thought so too, and expressed his willingness to go up to Appleton and inquire for her after he had had a cup of tea. He did not eat

anything, for his anxiety took away his appetite. He felt uneasy, but he did not know why. He thought at one moment that Nell might have been gored by a bull, but he had no sooner entertained the idea than he dismissed it. He successively thought of twenty perils to which she might have been exposed, but he could not make up his mind that he had hit the nail on the head in any one of his conjectures. He wished he could see Tom, because he was perfectly certain that the lovers, as he had always thought them, had had a misunderstanding or a quarrel, and if he could have met Tom, and questioned him, possibly he might arrive at something like the truth. At last he consoled himself with the idea that his daughter was at the Hall, and that he would find her safely ensconced in the housekeeper's room, doing a little needlework, or assisting Mrs. Brown in some domestic matter which pressed very much upon her attention, and would admit of no delay. He walked across the fields at a good round pace. The evening was cool and the air balmy. When he had walked some distance he got into the squire's land, for Mr. Weston White cultivated a few acres himself, and despite his anxiety he could not resist the temptation of stopping a moment to examine a bit of ground planted with broad beans. The land had been well manured, and, thankful for the nourishment, had shown its gratitude in returning the sower ever so many fold for his outlay. It was a magnificent crop, and the scent which arose from the fragrant blossoms was far superior to any pro-

duction of the perfumer. After expressing his admiration of the beans by an audible grunt, the farmer pursued his way, and in a short time reached the Hall. He entered the yard, which lay in the rear of the mansion, and after speaking a word to a groom, who was rubbing down a mare Mr. Charles had been riding that afternoon, he went to the back door, and entered. He was well known to everybody, so that he did not perform the ceremony of ringing the bell. Making his way up the stairs, he walked into the butler's pantry. The butler held out his hand, and a friendly greeting passed between them. Mr. Wilson inquired if the housekeeper was in, and on being told that he would find her in her room, he crossed the pantry, and knocked at the door leading into the housekeeper's apartment. Her cheery voice told him to come in, and pushing open the door, he entered without hesitation. Mrs. Brown looked up inquiringly. When she saw who her visitor was she appeared somewhat confused; but as the farmer was not very quick at perceiving things, he did not notice her temporary astonishment. Almost instantly she recovered her equanimity, and asked him to take a seat, at the same time expressing her pleasure at seeing him, and making a trivial remark about the weather. The farmer stammered a reply, and then, with characteristic frankness, began to state the motive he had in calling. He said that his daughter had left home early in the morning, and when he left the farm she had not returned, and he said that his wife and himself had conjectured that the missing

one might have been over to the Hall. Mrs. Brown, with a placid smile, assured him that she had not seen his daughter since eleven o'clock that morning.

Bell, she said, had walked over to see if she could help her in any way, but having nothing for her to do that day, she had given her a glass of currant wine, and, after having a chat together, she had gone away, saying she should go home again. That was all she knew, and most likely Mr. Wilson would find his child at home when he returned.

This intelligence was not very satisfactory, nor was it calculated to quiet the apprehensions of an anxious parent; but Mrs. Brown's manner was so candid, so open, and so apparently straightforward, that he could only thank her and take his leave, after drinking a glass of brandy which the old lady forced upon him, and which, owing to his low spirits and the depression he felt, he had not the heart to refuse. His walk home was a sad one, for he could not help thinking that something, he knew not what, had happened to Bell. He determined to go straight home, and if she was not there, he would at once run over to Tom, and see what tidings he could learn from him. He reflected that she might have walked over to the Gorse Farm, as Tom Thorburn's home was called, and if so, what more likely than that she should have been asked to stop to tea. Bell, he knew, was often very thoughtless, and perhaps was far from thinking of the annoyance her prolonged absence

would cause. He pleaded for her with himself in every possible way, and clung to his last hope like a drowning man to a straw. On his way home he did not let the grass grow under his feet. Mrs. Wilson was standing in the porch awaiting his arrival. When she saw him returning alone, her countenance fell. She eagerly demanded if he had heard anything of her. He told her what Mrs. Brown had said to him, and in his turn declared that he had expected to find her at Oak-tree. The only thing that remained to be done, was to run over as quickly as possible to the Gorse Farm, and see if Bell was there. The farmer had carried on his conversation with his wife outside the house; so, merely saying he would be as quick as he could and bring the hussey back with him, he strode off in the direction of Stoke Golding. He had not gone more than half a mile before he met Tom, who was walking hurriedly towards Oak-tree. So intent was Tom upon performing his journey as quickly as he could, that he did not perceive Mr. Wilson till he almost ran up against him. The farmer instantly inquired for his daughter, and his alarm and consternation may be imagined when Tom replied that he had just left home, and they had not seen her there all day; he added that he was coming over to Oak-tree to make inquiries respecting her, for he had had bad dreams the night before, and as he was afraid something had happened to her, as soon as he could knock off work, he had run over to see her, or her father and mother. The farmer was greatly agitated; linking

his arm in that of Tom, he led the way back to Oak-tree. Neither spoke a word during their short journey. When Mrs. Wilson heard what Tom had to say, she turned deadly pale. They could not but conclude that something had happened to her. They sat round the hearth in the kitchen, there was no fire in the grate. The rays of the setting sun had long since streamed in through the open window, and now they could see the great luminary, all glowing and golden, sinking into the clouds in the far west. Suddenly the farmer's face assumed a stern expression, and turning to Tom, he said solemnly, almost fiercely—

"You ha' had summat to do wi' this."

Tom felt pained by the accusation, but he replied meekly, very meekly, to the angry and impetuous question. He was very heartbroken, for he could not help thinking that what he had for long past feared so much had really happened at last. Then, in his simple country dialect, he told the whole story of that night when he had parted from her with a kind word, and a promise to watch over and protect her upon his lips. He was conscious that he had badly fulfilled that promise, but he had so many things to reproach himself with that he did not dwell upon one long. He told how he had proffered his love, and how he had been rejected, almost with contumely. He told how they had at first parted in anger, and how he had turned round, conquered his rebellious spirit, and made submission to her. He told how she had spoken ambiguously about certain gentlemen, adding the scrap of con-

versation which he had overheard between the housekeeper and Bell; and he told, what he had not even told Bell, that he had idolized the idea of making her his wife for years—that he had lived upon it—cherishing it in the daytime, and making it food for his dreams at night. And then the poor fellow covered his face with his hands, and said, in a broken voice, that he should never get over it, he wished he could die, and hoped something would occur every day to drive a fresh nail into his coffin. Mr. and Mrs. Wilson listened to this unaffected recital without making more than an occasional interruption. When Tom had finished, they comforted him as well as they were able in their homely way, and the farmer, going to a cupboard, brought out a bottle of brandy; Tom and the farmer drank some diluted with water, but Mrs. Wilson would not touch a drop. After a time, they somewhat recovered their prostrated energies, and discussed Bell's sudden disappearance in an animated manner; one general sentiment seemed to prevail, and that was that she must be followed up and recovered, if all their time was spent in doing it. One and all were of opinion that Mrs. Brown knew more than she chose to tell, and it was resolved to question her minutely. Tom also said that he would make it his business to see the young squire; if he had left for London or any other place, suspicion would point strongly towards him as the abductor, and Tom was quite ready to follow him anywhere; wherever, in fact, the clue he could get, if it was as slight as gossamer, would

lead him. Much shocked, much alarmed, much sorrow-stricken, but unanimous in this resolve to recover the lost sheep and punish the criminal, they parted for the night, agreeing to meet again the next morning.

CHAPTER IV.

A FALSE SCENT.

On the ensuing day Tom was early at Oak-tree. He was a little more hopeful than the night before, when he had parted in so sad a manner with the farmer and his wife. George Wilson was awaiting him; he pressed Tom to have a cup of tea and some home-made bread-and-butter, but he steadily refused, he was not in the humour for eating. When he saw that Tom was equally anxious with himself to begin the day's work, the farmer without further ceremony announced that he was ready, and together they started for Appleton. The two men, hale and hearty as they were, soon arrived at their destination. Mr. Wilson asked the first man he met if the young squire was moving; it was hardly eight o'clock, but Charley White was well-known to be an early riser—the farmer's only fear was that he should be told he had left the country for London or some other place. Great was his satisfaction when he heard that the young master had been up and about this two hours, and in reply to further inquiries he learned that he would find him in the kennels if he would take the trouble to go round. The farmer did not require a guide, he knew his way, and followed by Tom he went towards the kennels. When they got there they found Charley White superintending the cropping

of a dog's ears; he held a piece of dried hide in his hands, cut in a peculiar shape, this he placed on the ear of the dog and marked the outline with a piece of white chalk, so as to direct the scissors of the clipper. Charles White was so intent with his occupation that he did not see the farmer, who thought that if the young squire had really abducted his daughter, he was the most accomplished and the most self-possessed villain that he had ever heard or read of.

At last the farmer ventured to speak, and wished the squire good morning. Charley White looked up, and instantly recognised the farmer.

"Morning, Wilson," he said; "hope I see you well."

"I be bobbish, sir—pretty bobbish, thank 'ee."

"And what's the best news with you?"

Then he turned to the keeper, who held the dog between his knees, and exclaimed—

"It's very odd, Hawkins, you cant hold that dog still for a moment."

Putting the finishing touches to the ears, he added—"Now, then, clip away."

The scissors were soon put in requisition, and very quickly the operation was over. The ears fell upon the ground, the blood spurted from the wounds, which Charles White bathed with a sponge dipped in salt and water.

"That'll do," he said; "let her go now."

The man untwisted a piece of string which he had tied round the dog's nose and neck, by way of a muzzle, and then put her on the ground. The dog shook herself and walked leisurely into her

kennel, where some clean straw had been provided for her. The young squire sat down upon a low wall and exclaimed—

"There's a bull, for you! Couldn't beat that, Wilson, could you?"

"She be a foine bit of stuff, Mr. Charles, and no mistake 'bout that," replied the farmer.

"Bred her myself," said Charley White, with a complacent air.

The farmer wanted to speak, but he did not exactly know what to say. Charles White perceived his hesitation, and thought that his manner was rather strange. Looking at him for an instant, he said—

"Well, farmer, what can I do for you this morning?"

"I be wanting to speak to you upon a little matter of business, Mr. Charles."

"Very well; I'm your man."

George Wilson looked at the keeper who had cut the dog's ears; he was still standing-by, waiting, apparently, for further orders. Charles interpreted the farmer's wistful glance, and said—

"You can go, Hawkins; I shan't want you any more till after breakfast. The bitch 'll lie quiet enough where she is. Oh! I'll tell you what you can do, I thought there was something I'd forgotten, just give that little toy terrier some fern oil; the usual dose, you know, and turn her out on the lawn. I shall see her when I come in."

The man touched his cap and walked away.

"Now farmer," continued Charley, "I'm at your service."

George Wilson's face flushed; he felt that his daughter's shame was his own, and he didn't exactly like to be the first to publish it; but he was in an awkward position, he had undertaken an unpleasant task, and he was obliged to go through with it. Tom was very uneasy, and his eyes positively glared as he glanced at the young squire, who he rather suspected was the destroyer of George Wilson's and his own domestic happiness.

"You see, sir," began the farmer, "our gal be gone."

Perhaps it was better for him that he had blundered at once into a full expression of the evil he was deploring. The announcement was abrupt enough; but when he had told his pitiful story in half-a-dozen words he breathed a sigh of relief, and taking out his large China silk handkerchief, he mopped his face after the manner of rustics when they are perplexed and don't know what to do with their hands.

"Your girl! Which girl? What girl is it?" asked Charley White, looking as if he was acquainted with the face of so many on the estate that he could not tell which one in particular was alluded to.

"Why, Bell Wilson!" returned both the farmer and Tom, in the same breath.

"Oh! now I know where we are," replied Charley. "Go on. Where is she gone to?"

"That's just what we don't know."

"You don't know where your girl's gone to, farmer?" said Charley White, looking him straight in the face.

The farmer thought that they had found a mare's nest when their suspicions rested on the young squire, whose manner was so frank and open, that he did not look at, all events, the criminal they wanted to prove him.

"None on us know," said Tom, putting in his oar, bashfully.

"Well, my man, I'm just as much in the dark now as I was before," replied Charley; "you'd better draw the curtain up a little higher if you want me to see at all clearly."

"Why, squire, the fact be this 'ere," began Tom.

"Let I speak, Tom, lad," said the farmer. "You see, Mr. Charles, our gal be gone."

"Well, we got as far as that before, I think."

"Give I time, and I'll tell 'ee the rights on it."

"Oh! take your own time," said Charley White, flicking flies off the wall with a little switch he held in his hand, and looking as if he were resigned to his fate.

"We be come to you, sir, to see if you could tell us anything respectin' the gal."

The farmer had fired his shot. He had laid a stress upon the word "you," and he now stood still to see the effect of the discharge.

Charles White certainly elevated his eyebrows a little, and that was all.

"What's the good of coming to me?" he said, quite calmly. "How the blazes should *I* know anything about your girl. You don't suppose I go about the country picking up young women, do you?"

"It be a queer start, Mr. Charles," said the farmer, sententiously.

"I shall be glad to help you in any way, Wilson; but your coming to me for information is the finest thing, I think, I've heard of for a long time."

"*If I could only catch 'em!*" exclaimed Tom, grinding his teeth together in a red Indian sort of manner.

"Well, my pipkin, what would you do, eh?" asked Charles, with a merry twinkle in his eye.

"Pooneh his head," answered Tom, promptly, clenching his prodigious fists as he spoke.

"If he isn't a fool, whoever he is, he'll keep out of *your* way, my little Samson," said Charles; but almost instantly becoming serious again, he turned to the farmer and exclaimed—

"Now, farmer, you've got something else on your mind, haven't you?—if so, out with it. I'm a magistrate, you know, and if you suspect anybody, you shall have a warrant down on the nail. I'm willing to do all I can to help you. As far as I can gather from your not very explicit account, your daughter Bell has suddenly disappeared from her home, and you are anxious, naturally enough, to get her back again. I suppose this young man's her lover?—and, in fact, it is a repetition of the old story. Am I right, or am I wrong?"

"You be right enow; but the main reason as we come to you wor, that the gal wor seen a-coming long the roa-ad to Appleton, and Mrs. Brown——"

"What about her?"

"She told I yester' e'en that t' wench come to

see her in t' mornin', and as she had no work for her, she went back hum agin. Now I'll take my bible as she wor never seen arterards—that be arter leaving the hall—leastways not seen by Tom, or I, or the missus."

"*That's odd,*" *mused Charley White—*"*that's odd, upon my word.*"

"And so you see as we ha' come to you, sir," concluded the farmer.

"Wilson," suddenly said Charles White, very earnestly, "you don't believe that I know anything about your girl?"

"It be a rum go," was all the farmer would answer.

"Do you mean to stand there and declare that you think I know anything about this girl, Bell Wilson?"

"Well, Mr. Charles, I'll tell 'ee," replied Wilson. 'I did think last night as how you might ha' known summut, but now, since I've been a-talking to you, I'll giv' up the iday. Your mug be too honest, and I dunno how you could be so quiet and geniwine-like, if so be as you wor a-lying to. who be the gal's feather."

George Wilson, like many other honest and unsophisticated people, judged others by himself.

"Give us your hand on that, my boy," exclaimed Charles White. "I give you my word, as a gentleman, that I know no more about the disappearance of your girl than Adam, or an unborn baby."

"Wish I may die, if I think the squoire do," blurted out honest Tom.

"Sudden death is not desirable at any time," said Charley, with a smile; "but your good opinion of me is well founded. Besides, what should I do with the girl?—I am not the sort of man for a game of that sort. I care more for my dogs and my horses than I do for women. Why, man alive, I'd about as soon have a polecat in my house as I would a woman."

Tom turned his hands about as if he were holding hot potatoes or chestnuts in them. It was evident he wanted to say something. His intelligence had received a sudden spurt in the shape of an idea.

The farmer could perceive this, and he came to the rescue by saying—

"Spit it out, Tom, lad, we be all a-list'nin'."

"There was that noight, fearmer, as I heard Mrs. Brown and Bell"—his voice faltered as he spoke her name—"a talking together, and Mrs. Brown axed her if she wouldn't rayther be the wife of a gentleman than the wife of a lab'ring mon, who would knock her down and mebbe tromple her."

This was a long speech for Tom, but when he had successfully brought it to a conclusion, Charles White said—

"You heard Mrs. Brown make those remarks to Bell."

"Yes, Mr. Charles."

"You are sure of that?"

"Strike me dead if——"

"Ah! I believe you. Why should you invent a thing like that; I see, now, your object in coming

to me; you thought that Mrs. Brown and myself were possibly accomplices in the abduction of your daughter?"

They both nodded their heads.

"At all events you were positive of one thing, that Mrs. Brown knew more about the girl's disappearance than she chose to tell. Eh?"

At this they nodded their heads more violently than before. Indeed, if Tom's caput had not been well forged and well set upon his shoulders, it must inevitably have been dislocated.

"'Gad! there is some reason in the conclusion, too," muttered Charley to himself.

"Well," he said, aloud, "I will question Mrs. Brown myself, and if I can discover anything I will let you know instantly. In the meantime, I should advise you to hunt the country up. You might as well drag the ponds about here, there is no saying whether some accident may not have happened to the girl. Foul play I should hardly suspect any one of committing, for the people about here are peaceable and decent enough. We have very few tramps, for the governor always gives them seven days at the treadmill. Well, I hope, for your sakes, it may all come right in a day or two; I'm sure I don't see why it should not. But you take my advice, and search all the places round about, and perhaps you will hear some tidings of the missing one. You can look in again to-morrow, if you like, and report progress. I'll do all I can for you with pleasure, as I said before, and if Mrs. Brown is in any way mixed up with the affair, which I hardly should think, I'll do my

best to get it out of her, you may rely upon that. Now I must wish you good morning, my men, for I want some grub, and I heard the bell go ten minutes since. If you'll stop and take some breakfast you can run round to the Hall; you know your way. You'll see what they can do for you."

Nodding familiarly to them, the young squire walked through the shrubberies at a quick pace in the direction of the front of the house. The two men sadly retraced their steps to Oak Tree.

CHAPTER V.

THE ICE-HOUSE.

THE park at Appleton was as fine a thing of its kind as was to be seen in Warwickshire. As you passed through the lodge gates, you went up an avenue for some distance. The trees that lined the road were ancient as the Order of Foresters. On either side of them was a footpath, and beyond that a thickly-wooded belt. Brushwood of the most impenetrable kind flourished undisturbed by bill-hook or hatchet. The fern grew to a great height, and the deer with which the park was thickly stocked made a covert of these spinnies—as the country people call pieces of ground covered with trees, which are not big enough to arrive at the dignity of a wood and too large to be called simply a clump. There were paths, known to the deer and the game-keepers, which led you into all sorts of wild nooks and angles, and here and there you would come upon a pond stocked with the finest fish, and strictly preserved. The surface of these ponds would, in most cases, be covered with duckweed and waterlilies of varied hues, but Mr. Weston White had, years ago, turned up a quantity of mandarin ducks and rare water fowl of several kinds upon his ornamental waters, and some of them had increased and multiplied, afterwards emigrating, with their off-

spring, to the more remote waters of which I am speaking. Perhaps a tree would have blown down during the autumnal equinox, and the keepers would leave it lying, half in half out of the water, and in its branches the waterfowl would make their nests, and do as their progenitors had done before them. After continuing for nearly half a mile, a vast, undulating prairie opened before you, stretching farther on either side than the naked eye could reach. Trees, aged and venerable, dotted the green expanse; chestnuts, in all the glory of their dense and vivid foliage; oaks that had been riven by the lightning, and blasted years and years long gone, still spoke of former grandeur; elms of a mighty size, and pines that would have sent a shipbuilder into ecstacies; beech trees, with their graceful and drooping branches, and some fine specimens of the purple beech, so seldom seen except in gardens. Here and there a Chili pine, protected from the cattle by a girdle of dry thorns, reared its slender head, and testified to the taste of its planter. The timid deer pricked up their ears as they perceived you afar off, and the herd would move slowly out of your way, cropping the grass leisurely as they went. Sheets of water were to be distinguished here and there, fringed with plantations of firs. Islands sprung up in the lakes, and boat-houses, at various points, contained craft which invited you to venture upon the water. The Hall itself stood upon a slight eminence in the distance; a fine gothic building, which deserved the praise bestowed upon it. To

the left a denser mass of trees, crowning a small hillock, attracted attention. This was popularly known as the ice-house. It had, once upon a time, been used as a receptacle for frozen water, but lately it had become sacred to Mr. Weston White, and him alone. Some years ago he had employed a celebrated London builder to make some alterations that were much needed in different parts of the estate. The builder sent some men down from London, who were considered a very taciturn set. They were capital workmen, however. They set about whatever was given them to do, and did it in a manner which only London handicraftsmen know how to. Amongst other things which Mr. Weston White wished them to alter or improve, was the ice-house, and the entire gang were employed about it for more than a week. This excited some attention at the time, but the workmen never revealed the nature of their work, and those who were fond of gossiping were compelled to guess. Rumours floated about, but in time the affair died out, and was partially forgotten. Sometimes people having occasion to pass by the ice-house late at night, declared that they saw smoke arising from the solid earth; and one man averred that he had seen a dusky figure flitting about between the hours of one and two in the morning. Perhaps these reports never reached Weston White at all; if they did he took no notice of them. He often visited the ice-house, and he made no secret of his visits. The door was always kept carefully locked, and it was said that Bramah sent a man down expressly

to fit on a lock which nobody could pick. A loose, poaching fellow, called David Manning, had once surreptitiously entered the park at night, and had endeavoured to open the door of the ice-house with pick-locks and skeleton keys. He admitted as much afterwards. He took a companion with him, who was keeping watch on the top of the hillock. Suddenly the companion heard the discharge of firearms. David Manning cried out that he was shot. His companion ran away in dire and mortal terror, glad enough to escape with a whole skin; and the next morning David Manning was found by one of the keepers with a charge of swan shot in his body, and as nearly dead through the hæmorrhage as could be. They sent him to the county hospital, and after lingering in a precarious state, half alive, half dead, for many months, he at last got better, and finally recovered. It was then that he swore a great oath that he would be revenged upon Weston White, who, he solemnly declared, had fired at him. He was frequently seen hovering about the ice-house, and wandering upon the confines of the estates. When Weston White heard of this he gave the strictest and most peremptory orders to his keepers and watchers to warn him off whenever he was seen, and if he persisted in his trespasses to take him up and prosecute him. Manning was frequently convicted, and walked I am afraid to say how many miles upon the county treadmill. But still he persisted, and at last it became quite a proverb. If anything clung to anybody with pertinacity, people used to say, "Ah! you

might just as well try to get rid of David Manning," and then there was a laugh. It was generally supposed that Mr. Weston White used the old ice-house as a sort of library or laboratory, or something of that kind. Charley had been inside it once or twice, and when asked about it said it was the "governor's folly," but there was never much to be got out of Charley when he did not want to speak or be communicative. David Manning was a man with antecedents; what those were nobody knew, but he had not always lived in Warwickshire. He had once, in an unguarded moment, admitted that he was a Yorkshireman. He did a stroke of work now and then, and would live upon the money he made for the next week or two, never offering to work continuously, as most men did. He rarely drank, but when he did he remained intoxicated for several days. When he got sober again he would not touch a drop of anything for weeks. If you had asked anybody about him, they would have told you he was "cranky." But if he were so, there was a method in his madness, which will shortly be seen. It was more likely that he had become eccentric through brooding over real or fancied wrongs, for nothing so curdles the milk of human existence as dwelling upon injuries, and entertaining the thought of sweet revenge, which it is fondly hoped will some day be vouchsafed.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STATE OF AFFAIRS.

THE disappearance of Bell Wilson in so sudden and mysterious manner caused a great sensation wherever she was known; ponds and lakes were dragged, woods and gorses and spinnies searched, but no tidings of her could be discovered. Tom and the farmer had called upon the young squire the next day, as he had told them to, but he could give them no further information; he declared that he had questioned and cross-questioned Mrs. Brown in the minutest and closest way, but that she answered with great frankness and apparent candour, that she was as totally ignorant of the girl's fate as anyone in the county; she stated that she had seen her in the morning, but when she left the hall she fully supposed that she had gone home, and she knew no more than the Emperor of China what had become of her. Charley White repeated what Tom Thorburn had told him as to the latter having overheard a scrap of conversation between herself and Bell on the night when the two women walked part of the way towards Oak-tree together. Mrs. Brown did not express the least surprise at this; she at once admitted it. She said they were merely conversing, as women occasionally do, about matrimony, which is always an important institution in feminine eyes.

"I advised the girl," she said, "perhaps well, perhaps ill, that is a matter of opinion, but I advised her to try and marry above her own position in life. When I was a girl I had some little ambition, and was nobody myself either by my mother's or my father's side; for my mother, sir, I don't mind telling you, was a laundress, and my father was a waiter at a tavern in the city, and used to come home, I remember well, looking very greasy, and smelling horribly of roast and boiled, and hashes of various descriptions; but I did take a step in the right direction when I married Brown, for he was an officer in the customs—I am aware that ill-natured people, sir, call them tide-waiters, but it was an appointment under Government, and very happy we were until the cholera morbus came up to London and carried him off to Kensal-green, which little journey, sir, cost me, his widow, near upon fifteen pounds—two for breaking the ground, and the rest was undertaker's charges, which they put it on shameful, but it nearly exhausted my slender resources, as he did not belong to a burial-club, sir, as I've said, and he did not leave much behind him, so I was glad to answer your father's advertisement, who is a gentleman, Mr. Charles, and I've been in your father's service now going on ten year, and I have thought of going into the public line afore I die. But I don't think you ought to come to me, sir, as if you thought I'd descend to a mean action, and entice away a girl as never did me any harm."

Here Mrs. Brown raised her pocket-handkerchief

gracefully to her eyes, and wiped away the smallest suspicion of a tear. Charles White assured her that he only wanted an explanation from her own lips in order to assure himself that she knew nothing of the matter, and begged her not to think that he had intended to insult her in any way whatever. And then he left her, and shortly afterwards he saw the farmer and Tom. When they heard what he had to tell them, they were very crestfallen, and had not a word to say for themselves, and thanking Charley, after their manner, they walked away like a couple of dogs with their tails between their legs. They had done all that they could do, and they were only able now to sit down and watch the course of events. The farmer would not believe that his daughter was lost to him for ever, but he could not shut his eyes to the fact that she had disappeared and left no trace behind her. Tom stoutly buttoned his waistcoat over his heart and his sorrow, and tried, in his rough way, to comfort the bereaved father and mother.

Mrs. Wilson was very much cut up, but not so much so as her husband. She felt indignant that *her* daughter should have gone away in the manner she did, for women never look lightly upon the sins of women; she commiserated Tom and sympathized with him in his trouble, and he invariably declared that the girl would turn up again, and come back to her home. But the old people shook their heads incredulously.

One day, about a week after Bell was so strangely lost to her family and her friends, Tom said that he

had made up his mind to "go to Lunnon;" he had put by "a few pun'" in the bank, and he would draw it and "go to Lunnon," for he had an idea that Bell had either gone, or had been taken to the great metropolis. George Wilson had great difficulty in dissuading Tom from putting this rash idea into execution; at last his remonstrances succeeded, and Tom consented to "bide a bit."

The two farmers went about their work mechanically, but managed to find some relief by keeping their minds continually occupied; and in this way a fortnight elapsed and not the slightest trace, not the remotest clue, not the faintest whisper respecting Bell Wilson was heard or spoken of.

Mr. Weston White rode over to the town of Appleton, sometimes twice a day, and stayed some time at the bank. So frequent were his visits that the depositors became alarmed, and said that there was a screw loose. Whether there was or not remained unknown, but the banker's face was clouded with care and he seemed to alter strangely day by day. There was an apprehension of a run upon the bank one market-day, but when the affrighted farmers rushed into the bank, cheque in hand, Mr. Weston White met them with a smile upon his lips, and going behind the counter cashed the drafts himself, giving every applicant gold instead of notes. Several large bags of gold stood by his side and he told his clients that he would rather give them gold than notes as the former were more plentiful just then than the latter. Those who had been the first to rush in, soon went back to the

"Appleton Arms," and declared that "Squire Weston was right enough. Don't tell them, he wasn't the sort of chap to break. It was the Bank of England to a China orange on Squire Weston."

And so the panic was checked, and by the sacrifice of a thousand pounds or so Mr. Weston White allayed the alarm and was able to laugh at the sinister rumours which had for some time past been afloat concerning his solvency.

Charley White went on in his usual quiet way; he occasionally potted a coney, as he called bowling a rabbit over, and with his horse and his dogs he was very happy and very contented. Sometimes he would wonder what could have become of Bell Wilson, and say to himself—"Doosed odd about that girl; can't for the life of me conceive where she has got to. I suppose, though, that she has cut away with some fellow—not the first fool who has done the same thing. Sorry for the agricultural interest though, they seemed to take it to heart so much."

This was a soliloquy.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CRYPTIC CHAMBER.

It was a dark night; black clouds obscured the sky; moon there was none, and the stars were not even dimly visible. Indications of a thunder-storm were plainly to be seen on all sides. The restless soughing of the wind amongst the branches of the trees, the long dull flashes of distant sheet lightning which spoke of a raging tempest miles away, the thick and oppressive nature of the atmosphere, all told of a probable convulsion of nature. The keepers of the Appleton preserves preferred the interior of their cottages to the chance of a wet jacket in the woods. A few watchers, who could not afford to do as they liked and be independent even for once in their lives, were on the look out for poachers and other desperate characters. But vigilant as they doubtlessly were, they did not notice a solitary individual who, creeping along as stealthily as a serpent, managed to enter the domain of Appleton. Proceeding with great caution he neared the park and carefully crossed it, taking the direction of the ice-house. He was a man belonging to the common order of people. In dress and manner there was nothing extraordinary about him, or calculated to arrest attention. His face, could you have seen it, was expressionless, or

if it had any expression it was a dull and leaden one, scarcely worthy the name. When he reached the ice-house he did not enter the little compound by the usual gate and path which led to the door admitting to the innermost recesses. He crawled through a gap in the hedge and with some difficulty penetrated a mass of briars, tangled and knotted. When he got into the centre of the thicket he paused and took from under his coat a dark lantern filled with oil and ready lighted. He turned on the light, but kept it fixed upon the ground, which it irradiated for some small distance, but he was especially careful not to allow its rays to gleam or to flash to the right or the left even for an instant. The light of the lantern revealed a cavity in the soil of considerable dimensions. It was nearly five feet deep; the earth had been carefully taken out and evidently conveyed away, probably to some distance, as not a particle of mould was anywhere round about to be distinguished. The man tied his lantern to a piece of rope and lowered it into the hole. It looked sepulchral as a newly-made grave.

The light revealed some brickwork at the bottom of the pit. The mortar, which had formerly cemented the bricks, had been removed, so that the masonry could apparently be raised at will. The man, after allowing his lantern to rest upon the bricks, with great dexterity swung himself into the hole, and soon stood by the side of the light. The cavity was of sufficient size to allow him to stoop. Then he bent his body, and, without any difficulty, raised one of the bricks from its resting-place.

Rising almost instantly to his natural height, he laid the brick on the ground above, amongst the brambles. Another and another followed, until only those he stood upon remained. In less than half-an-hour he had removed two rows of brick-work. The bricks came out so easily that the ice-house did not appear to be vaulted, but the roof rather seemed to be supported by pillars together with a certain amount of mutual resistance. An aperture was by this means revealed of sufficient size to allow the body of a man to pass through. Nothing remained to impede the progress of this man except a layer of plaster, which evidently formed the ceiling of the apartment below. He hesitated a moment before he broke this, and rising from his stooping position, he felt in his belt or girdle, as if to satisfy himself that certain weapons he carried about him were secure, and in their places. Satisfied on this point, he again bent his body and placed an ear as near as he could, to the ceiling. A small clock of Swiss or French manufacture chimed the hour in a silvery-tinkling tone. The man counted the strokes. They were ten. It wanted, then, but two hours of midnight. For more than five minutes, although in a painful position, the man continued to listen. Not a sound rewarded his industry and his diligence. He was satisfied at this, if one could judge from the gleam in his eyes. He raised himself to the open air once more, probably to relieve himself from the unpleasantness of stooping so long. If Weston White could have caught this man where he then

was, he would have esteemed it the best day's work that he had done for a long time. If any single keeper, or body of keepers, on the estate could have captured this man, they might have been certain of a ten-pound note; for that reward was promised, and had been given them every time they had brought him into the town of Appleton, for this man was David Manning. After he had rested himself sufficiently, he resumed his work, and, with a sharp knife, removed the plaster bit by bit. When he came to a lath, he carefully sawed through it with one of those miraculously small saws that burglars know so well how to use, and which frequently enable them to break through the strongest prisons. He worked hard—the sweat poured down his face; for the confined place he was working in, and the closeness of the night, made him very hot. But he was used to hard work—used to toil and trouble and disappointment; he had worked hard for months and months on all sorts of odd occasions—on every dark night that opportunely came—and he had not worked in vain. People wondered why he would venture on Weston White's property, and, as they could find no good reason for his pertinacity, they had said that he was a little mad; but the actual cause was what we have described. He had sworn that he would penetrate the mystery of the ice-house, and, after incredible toil and danger, he was in a fair way of doing so. When he had been sentenced by the Appleton bench of magistrates to a week's hard labour in the county gaol as a rogue and a vaga-

bond, he had brooded over his revenge, and smiled as he contemplated how near it was to its consummation. Every handful of earth which he had scattered to the winds, or thrown upon the highway, had brought a strange light to his eye, for he knew that he was an inch or half-an-inch, or the fraction of an inch, nearer the goal which he had set up as the summit of his ambition.

At last David Manning felt his knife penetrate the ceiling, and then he knew that the end was at hand—that the veil was about to be raised. His heart beat quickly; its swift palpitations were almost painful, and at times deprived him of breath. He had calculated as well as he could, before making his shaft, that it would lead him into a corner of the mysterious apartment; he would have gone a little more to the left than he had, but he was not able to do so. The thicket of brambles was his grand secret. It protected him on all occasions, and without it he could have done nothing. He took great care not to allow any part of the plaster to fall on the floor, and with the exception of a few chips and loose pieces he succeeded very well. A dim sort of light penetrated through the orifice he had made, and this showed that his ingress would not be near the centre of the room, where he concluded the light was. When David Manning had quite cleared the opening, he prepared to descend. The height, as well as he could judge, was not considerable. Nine feet, or between nine and ten, was the extreme altitude. If he held on by his hands to the bricks upon which he was at

present standing, and then suffered himself to fall when his body was within the apartment, he would not have more than four feet to drop, which was nothing to him—it would not even shake him. He resolved to adopt this course. He could perceive that the floor was neatly and softly carpeted, but he did not stop to scrutinize further, he was too anxious to make the descent to do so. A lowering of the body, a momentary pause, a drop, and he was where his heart and soul had been for twelve months and more. The light which met his eyes dazzled him for a few seconds. He laid his hand upon the butt-end of a pistol as a precautionary measure, and as soon as he had recovered the use of his eyesight, he scanned the apartment in which he found himself. The ceiling was fancifully covered and adorned with fantastic representations of the signs of the zodiac, and of the sun, moon, and stars. The carpet was soft and yielding, and his feet buried themselves in its depths. The room itself was quite round, entirely circular, and the furniture was also of a circular pattern, so that the sofas, chairs, and tables might fit in the places that were intended for them. The walls were plain, and entirely unornamented—not a single print or painting relieved the monotony; but, in order to make up for this sterility of art, the paper on the wall was of the most gorgeous and expensive description. There was a fireplace, and a door which led, apparently, into an inner apartment, for it was placed exactly opposite what Manning knew to be the entrance door, by the massive and ponderous lock, which he had in vain

endeavoured to pick. The circular apartment was deserted by its inmates, if inmates there were any. It would seem that there were, for the remains of a repast were upon a table in the centre of the room. David Manning was somewhat disappointed at perceiving everything of so simple a description, but two heavy-looking cabinets on either side the fireplace promised him some occupation. Before he essayed these, however, he resolved to penetrate a little further. Accordingly he opened the door of the inner chamber, previously taking one of the candlesticks containing a lighted candle off the table, as he had left his lantern on the bricks above. He turned the handle, the door opened, and David Manning stood upon the threshold. Why did he hesitate?—why did he stammer out something unintelligible?—why did he not advance further, until a voice, in gentle accents, bade him to?

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERY BECOMES MORE PROFOUND.

A LITTLE after twelve o'clock, on the same night when David Manning had with so much cleverness and skill effected an entry into the cryptic chamber of Squire Weston, a terrible thunderstorm burst over Appleton. Dark banks of clouds had been gathering for a long time, and at length the pent-up fury of the storm found vent. Loud and startling thunder-claps compressed the entire sky canopy together, as one crushes a sheet of tissue paper in one's hand. Vivid blinding lightning flashes, showing up the black and murky night in all its hideous darkness, mingled with the howling of the blast and the dashing vehemence of the impetuous rain. In the midst of this tempest a man's head and shoulders emerged from the earth above the ice-house, and in a moment David Manning stood once more upon the exterior soil. He seemed hilarious to a degree, the man seemed to have thrown off his former timidity and reserve of manner. He was like one who had achieved an object which he had all his life been searching for: an alchemist who had discovered the philosopher's stone, an enthusiast who had found out the true method of transmuting base metal into gold, a man of science who had at last detected or invented

perpetual motion. David Manning walked with a bounding and elastic step, and whistled gaily as he went as if keepers were not, and poaching was an offence not punishable under the statute. He reached the high road in safety, and after a wet and dreary walk arrived at Appleton. The public-houses were all shut, and he cursed them for it. Retiring to his lodgings, which were none of the cleanliest or healthiest, for he lived up a reeking court in the most densely-populated part of the town, amongst the people who worked mainly at the stocking-making factories, he went to bed and in a short time slept soundly. So confident, so elated did he seem, that he had not even taken the precaution to close up the hole in the earth through which he had descended into the old ice-house. He left it just as it was, as if he did not care whether his advent were known or not. If he had ardently wished it to be discovered he could not have acted more recklessly than he did. Nothing affected him. The blinding, soaking, penetrating rain did not extract a murmur from him. And he only grumbled when he found that he could obtain no spirits until the morning. The storm cleared off towards three o'clock, and as the grey dawn broke the rooks awoke and made the rookery echo to their shrill cries, and many a worm that day had reason to complain of the appetite of the early birds. Just between the lights Mr. Weston White's brougham drew up in the avenue, exactly opposite the ice-house. Shortly afterwards, Mr. White himself and Mrs. Brown appeared walking across the park. Between

them was a female figure thickly veiled. Mrs. Brown and the latter got into the vehicle, which immediately drove swiftly off in the direction of Appleton.

Weston White returned to the ice-house, where he remained closeted for more than an hour. At the expiration of that time he went back to the Hall, let himself in by means of a key, and proceeded to his private apartments. Shortly afterwards the noise of wheels was heard, and the brougham was driven to the stables. When all was still, Mr. White threw himself, dressed as he was, upon his bed, and slept for some hours. His sleep was restless, and he had bad dreams, if one might judge from the exclamations that broke from his lips; and the strange contortions into which he threw his body. This dog-sleep continued for some time, but at last exclaiming—"Othello was the man, Othello, Moor of Venice!" he awoke, his hair bristling, and the perspiration bursting from every pore. Starting up he walked across the room to the mantel-piece, and took in his hand a small phial which contained a liquid. There was the usual superscription upon it, on which was written chloric ether. He poured some water in a tumbler, and measured out forty drops of the ether, which he allowed to fall in the water. This he drank, and in a short time he became calmer and more collected. His nerves were less shaken—he was himself once more; and descending the stairs, he began what was to prove a most important day.

CHAPTER IX.

DAVID MANNING THINKS REVENGE IS SWEET.

MR. WESTON WHITE was sitting over his breakfast in a morning-room, having a frontage towards the west. The *Times* and the *Daily News* were lying upon the table; he had not as yet opened them. In an abstracted manner he cut the top of an egg off with a knife. It was little more than nine o'clock, and the mist rose slowly before the evaporating rays of the sun. A servant entered the room and said that a man was waiting down stairs who had expressed a wish to see Mr. White. The servant had said that his master was at breakfast and could not be disturbed, but the man persisted in saying that Mr. White would be glad to receive him, as he had business of an important nature to communicate. He did not give any name. When Mr. White heard this his face brightened, and he appeared to be screwing himself together for a combat of an intellectual nature. He contented himself with saying—

"Let him come up."

"Now, sir?" asked the domestic.

"Yes. In this room."

In a brief space David Manning stood upon the carpet, making what was intended for a bow. He presented a contrast to Mr. White which was

worth noticing. In him the low forehead, indicative of cunning, was prominent—in Mr. White the broad massive forehead, and the finely cut mouth, showed alike intellect and decision. One was a clumsy, brutish poacher, with a dash of snake in him—the other a clever rich banker, with the least possible tinge of—what shall we say? Well, the *amor nummi*—in him. Mr. Weston White looked at the man severely and exclaimed—

"Sit down."

"I can stand," he replied, gruffly.

"Please yourself," was the unconcerned answer. And Weston White went on eating his breakfast. David Manning lessened the distance between himself and the squire, but the latter took no notice of him whatever. At last he was constrained to break the silence, and exclaimed—

"You know me, squire."

"Perfectly."

"You've brought your fist down hard on me a score of times," said Manning.

"Not oftener than you have deserved, my man."

"Times change, squire," said David Manning; "an' it's a long lane as has no turning."

"So I used to learn when I was at school, my man," replied Weston White.

"Will you listen to me, squire? I've summut to say."

"Say what you like."

"Well, here goes. You see, squire, as I've been a poor, paltry sort of a wretch; I've walked many a mile on the mill all along of you. I ain't a gemman,

I ain't got no fields nor parks, no big place to live in; I ain't got no dogs nor no horses; I ain't got ever so many servants, all togged out in liveries; I ain't a banker; I ain't got no garden, nor no cellars, nor no *ice-houses*."

David Manning brought out the latter sentence with great emphasis, and looked around him with an air of triumph—very much as a member of the House of Commons might be supposed to do after carrying a favourite bill. Possibly he had expected Weston White to show symptoms of alarm, of distress, of perturbation, but that gentleman did nothing of the sort. He was as cool as a cucumber; he did not even change colour. He met the man's gaze unflinchingly, and looked at him so fixedly and so steadily, that he compelled him to lower his eyes. Then he said simply—

"Well."

If David Manning had been placed in a cellar, and a ton of coals suddenly dropped on his head and shoulders, he could not have been more astonished than he was. He looked as if he could hardly believe the evidence of his senses. But recovering himself with an effort, he returned to the charge.

"I allus said to myself as there was something mysterious about ice-houses afore I ever clapt eyes on that o' your'n, squire. I used to think about winter and frost, and being frozen to death, starved wi' the cold and that, and I used to say sometimes, when I hated any one more 'n usual—'My eyes, wouldn't I like to shut him up in one o'

them ice-houses for a single night; he'd cry out a bit, I warrant.'"

"The idea does you great credit," returned Mr. White. "It's a pity we don't torture now, or you would fill the post of sworn tormentor well."

"You may sn[redacted]squire, and talk foin, but it's them as gets out o[redacted]e wood first as ought to larf."

"Quite so, my friend. There you and I are quite in accord. But pray go on with your little story, or whatever you like to call it, about ice-houses."

David Manning chuckled, rubbed his hands together, and said—

"You'll excuse a rough chap like mysel', squire, but I should like a drop o' summut. You aint over and above civil to a cove as has walked over from Appleton on purpose to see you and have a friendly chat."

The squire's eyes flashed a very little, but he replied with his usual equanimity—

"Certainly. What would you like to have?"

"What does the nobs drink—them as comes to see you?" he demanded.

"Oh! different people have different tastes. But champagne——"

"Shampane! That's the stuff, gov'nor."

"Well, you will find a bottle under the cheffonier, in the wine-cooler."

David Manning went to the place where he was directed and took out of the ice a bottle of Moet's champagne. Holding it up to the light, he regarded it affectionately.

"Shall I open it for you?" asked Weston White.

The sarcasm in his tone would have been perceptible to any one but David Manning—his perceptions were too coarse, but his instincts told him he was being made fun of.

"You may larf, squire," he said. "I likes to see a cove larf. I larfs sometimes—leastways I allus does when I thinks of ice-houses."

He accompanied this speech with a leer such as the hyæna at the Zoological Gardens favours his keeper with when he is about to feed him.

Taking up a silver fork the man endeavoured to break the wire round the cork of the bottle with one of its prongs, but he did it so clumsily that he only succeeded in breaking the prong of the fork. With a curse, he let the fork drop on the floor, took a clasp knife out of his pocket, and in time cut the wire in two. After that the cork flew out with great violence, in the direction of the ceiling. David followed it with his eyes, and as the effervescing wine flowed out, he cried, admiringly—

"It's as good as fireworks."

Weston White quietly opened his newspaper and either read or pretended to do so, as if utterly oblivious of the presence of David Manning. There was not a tumbler within reach, so the man drank the wine out of the bottle, putting the neck in his mouth. When by repeated draughts he had half emptied it, he said, holding the bottle in his hand—

"I'll lay you wishes it was poison, squire?"

"Oh dear no, why should I?" replied Mr. White, from behind his newspaper.

"You don't. Then you oughter. You ain't alive to your own interests."

Mr. White maintained a complete silence.

"I think I'll go on with my story now, Mr. White."

"Well?"

"You see I feels raw when I thinks how I've been treated by you. You've persecuted me awful —but lor, when I come to think of ice-houses I's as right as a trivet."

"You seem to be mad on the subject, my friend."

"Oh no, not a bit of it. No more mad than yourself, squire—axing your pardon for making so bold as to say so."

This time the mock humility was on the part of the man, and not on that of the gentleman.

"When you have drunk your wine perhaps you will be good enough to enlighten me as to the object of your visit," said Weston White, putting down the paper, turning in his chair, and folding his hands across his knees.

David Manning also assumed a serious air, took another pull at the bottle, and replied—

"Squire, did you ever hear tell of a girl called Bell Wilson?"

The squire promptly replied, "Never."

"What?" cried Manning, springing forward a step.

"Don't be so demonstrative, my friend," said Weston White.

"You've never heard tell of Bell Wilson?"

"Never, I tell you."

"Well, that *is* a good 'un," and David Manning laughed.

There was a pause. Manning seemed to be collecting himself for another effort; when he had done so he said—

"Perhaps you'll say next you never hear tell of ice-houses?"

"Oh yes, I have. I remember perfectly that it was outside an ice-pit that I once had the pleasure of putting a charge of swan-shot into your rascally carcase."

David Manning scowled, and shaking his head as if to give force to what he was saying, he replied,—

"That was the worst day's work as you ever done, squire."

"Indeed!"

"It was; and cos why? I'll tell you. I swore when I was lying in the hospital desprit bad as I'd be revenged on you. Well, I've waited and waited, and I've put up wi' this and I've put up wi' that, an' at last the time have come. You've had the game all your own way, and a pretty long innings you've had; but you're bowled out at last, Squire Weston—you're bowled out at last."

"Oh! you think so."

"I think so? Don't I know it? Who knows it better? I've been slow, but I'm sure; and I'll crush you—ruin you—smash you like that."

As he spoke, he dashed the champagne bottle on the floor with great violence; but the bottle fell on the "kick," and, being made of strong glass, it rolled a little way, but did not break.

"Perhaps you may not be more successful, my man, with me in the ruining way than you were with that bottle in the smashing way."

David Manning had worked himself up to a great pitch of excitement, and he bent his eyes upon the squire with a sinister expression.

"David Manning!" suddenly cried Weston White, in a loud voice.

The man started and looked up.

"Now listen to me, my man; you've had your say. It's about time, I think, that I had mine. You have no objection to that, I suppose. If so, you have only to speak, and I shall be very glad to listen to you. Very well. You have behaved since you have been in this room as only a ruffian such as yourself could behave. I have humoured your eccentricity, because I remembered that the people all round about call you Mad Manning, and I thought to myself—Perhaps, poor fellow, he does not know what he is saying or doing. It may be a sudden fit of aberration, and it is as well to treat the foibles of lunatics leniently. You have hinted at certain things. You have hinted at certain absurd things which have no foundation in fact. But there is a method in your madness; and I will do you the credit of saying that you are not altogether so big a fool as I always took you to be. You miscalculated, however, my man, when you entered the lists with me, and I tell you plainly, openly, once for all, that I defy you, David Manning—I defy you!"

David Manning listened to this long speech with a twinkle in his eye, as if he were saying to himself, "You're a big fish, a very big fish; but I've got you in my net, and my net is not made in a

flimsy manner. It's a big net, and was made to hold a big fish. So you may kick, my boy, till you knock all the scales off your glittering back; but I'll hold you—I'll hold you fast enough."

"Now, squire," he said, "just give me the bat for a spell, and you stand behind the wickets an' stump me out, if so be as you can. My two points be, first, ice-houses, and, secondly, Bell Wilson. Let's stick to ice-houses first. I allers had a fancy as how I should like to see the inside o' one. There wor that one o' yourn in the park out there;"—he indicated the clump of trees which marked the spot through the window by a wave of his hand. "Well, I worked and I slaved, and I kep on at it for ever so many months. When I was cotched by your keeper, I was on my way to the ice-house. I was digging a hole wi' the few poor tools I had, and I used to carry away the mould in my pockets. I didn't care for the treadmill; I didn't care for seven or ten or fourteen days. I knew the time would come when I should have my revenge, and now it's come—it's come." David Manning clenched his fists, and ground his teeth, but after the paroxysm was over he continued—"It's come, Squire Weston; come better nor I ever expected it. Last night I finished the job, and got into your little crib, as people call the ice-house—a nice snug crib it wor. It wor round, and I thought it wor like a spider's web. And I thought so ever so much more when I saw that there wor a fly in the web. "Now we comes to the second part, and that's Bell Wilson. She ha' disappeared, squire, and Tom

Thorburn, I dare swear, wouldn't mind dropping down upon the fellow as has got her in his power. Bell be a pretty girl, and I don't wonder as how Tom be sweet upon her. Ever see Tom, squire? Well, you oughter; he stands six foot, o'er six foot I may say, and he could give a chap a tidy hiding if so be he wor inclined that way. Well, now look'ee here, squire. I've found Bell Wilson. I've spotted her. I know where she is. Oh! it's bootiful, it's downright bootiful."

The man rubbed his hands together in the greatest delight. Mr. Weston White was not in the least moved, he merely said, "Well."

"Well, squire, let's put this and that together."

"Certainly," replied the squire.

And the two men sat facing one another.

CHAPTER X.

"I DEFY YOU, DAVID MANNING, I DEFY YOU."

"You see, squire," continued David Manning, "that I'm getting on to be old. I've had a hard life, and gone through more nor you think on, long before I ever come to Warwickshire; and since I've been here I've spent more of my life in gaol than out of it, thanks to you. But my reward and my turn's come at last. Better late than never, say I, and I begin to agree with the chaplin at the prison, as the world aint so wery bad arter all's said and done. I've found out a secret o' yourn, squire. One as you thought no mortall could find out, and you're in my power."

"Well, my man, what is it you think you have found out? You see I am very tolerant. I listen to you. I waste my time with you. But it is at all times a melancholy thing to see a man allow his imagination to run away with his sober senses."

"Mebbe, mebbe. But I'm all there, squire. I'll tell you what it be I've found out. You put ice-houses and Bell Wilson together, squire, and then the murder's out."

"For the life of me, I cannot make head or tail of what you are saying. I wish I could, for your sake. You first of all mumble a lot of nonsense about *ice-houses*. Certainly, I have an ice-house.

Some years ago I turned it into a study, where I went to sit and think, and which I often frequent now when I want to be alone. Then you jabber something equally foolish about a girl called Pell Wilson, who you say disappeared from her home some time ago, as if that affected me in any way. I am sure I am very sorry for the girl's family, but she is not the first girl who has left her country home for the gaieties of a town life."

"Gaieties of an ice-house, squire."

"Don't you interrupt me, my good fellow. I cannot spare much more time," replied the Squire, holding up his hand. "Then, you say to me, put ice-houses and Bell Wilson together, and the murder will come out. I hope that you have not been committing any murder, David Manning. I hope sincerely that you have had nothing to do with this girl's disappearance. Your character is very bad in the neighbourhood. And if you were eventually to swing on the gallows before Warwick gaol, it would not surprise many people who are familiar with your name and your antecedents."

So coolly, with such complete composure was all this said, that David Manning's breath was completely taken away. He remained for a quarter of a minute with his mouth open, utterly incapable of replying. At last he said, in a great rage—

"This 'ere rig went do wi' me. I want money. You can square me if you like; if you don't like, I go up to Oak Tree farm and tell 'em where they can find Bell Wilson.'

"Go, my good man, as soon as you like. I don't

care where you go as long as you relieve me of your presence. Corduroys and poachers are not the nicest things in the world in a gentleman's breakfast-room, especially if he happen to have a weak stomach."

"I don't mean to wear 'em no more."

"A very wise resolve, my friend. One you should have come to long ago," said Weston White.

"I mean to wear the same togs as you do, and I'm goin' to live like you, and be a swell for a bit."

"Oh! indeed. I suppose you have had a fortune left you, all of a sudden, eh?"

"No, I aint, neither," replied David Manning.

"You have not? Then where will you get the money from?"

"From you."

"From me!" said Mr. White. "Oh, no. You are greatly mistaken, David Manning, if you suppose you will even get a penny-piece from me."

"Wont I? We'll see; look a 'ere. You've got Bell Wilson shut up in your ice-house."

"Indeed!"

"And you'll like all the people to know of it, I suppose, wont you?" said David, savagely.

"If what you say is the fact, the sooner the people who are interested in knowing it are acquainted with so strange a thing the better. I should say, by all means let them hear it."

"What?"

"All I can say is," continued Mr. White, "that

if what you say is true, I am not aware of it, nor have I been. But I can only look upon the assertion as an hallucination of yours, my friend; and I shall think it my duty to recommend your admission to the County Lunatic Asylum."

David Manning's face was convulsed with passion. The veins in his forehead were swollen almost to bursting with his hot and passionate blood, and stood out like black cords. In a loud voice he cried—

"Blast the County Lunatic Asylum and you too, you scoundrelly villain! They calls poor fellows villains at times for very little. But, blow me, if you genelmen isn't a sight worse nor all the poor chaps as ever worked in chains at Norfolk Island."

"You had better calm yourself," said Mr. Weston White, looking at the man with a compassionate air. "I don't know whether there is a strait-waistcoat in the house, but if there is, I am sure it is very much at your service."

"You wont buy me off, eh?" vociferated David Manning.

"Buy you off! What for?"

"So as I shan't go and split about this gal as you've got shut up. Why, you is as bad as any turbaned Turk in his what d'ye call."

"Listen to me, my friend," Mr. White said. "I shall not buy you off. Because you are a fool, and fools are not worth the notice of clever men. You've played your cards. You had a few trumps in your hand, but I managed to finesse through them, and you and your trumps are nowhere. You have lost

the game, and I have won it. As I had the honour to tell you just now, I defy you; and not only defy, but I laugh at you."

"We'll see," cried David Manning, laying his hand upon the bell-rope.

"By all means let us see. You speak after the manner of other sanguine blind men. For there are mental as well as physical blind men."

"Cut it short," said Manning. "Cos I's going to do it. I'm to be bought, sir. I'll take a thousand pun. It ain't much to a fellow like you."

"Not a halfpenny," was the calm and dignified response.

"I don't mind saying five 'under'd."

"Not a rap, my man. You are only wasting your breath in talking to me."

"Then I'll ring the bell and tell the 'ole kit o' your servants. Servants! why I'd rather die afore I'd crawl an' creep to the likes o' you."

"Ring, my man, by all means ring; only be careful, in your excited state you might pull the bell-rope down."

David Manning was hot and feverish. He seemed like a man in a dream who is standing under a tree loaded with golden apples, but who is not able to reach and pluck them—gradually, slowly, but surely, the prize sinks away from before him, changing, changing, changing, like a dissolving view, until nothing remains but a bare and blighted stem, and all else around is sterile and desolate. With an impatient gesture he rang the bell, and looked at Mr. White to see what effect

the movement had upon him. But the squire had taken up the newspaper once more, and was to all intents and purposes deep in its contents.

"I've done it," said David Manning, in a voice of desperation.

"Eh?"

"I've done it."

"Then you have done a foolish thing. That's all, my man."

Presently a servant answered the tintinnabulatory summons. He stood near the doorway. David Manning was about to speak, but Mr. White anticipated him by saying—

"Tell Mr. Charles that I want him particularly. If he is engaged, ask him to be good enough to postpone whatever he may be about, as I wish to see him directly."

The servant replied—

"Yes, sir," and departed on his errand.

"I have sent for my son. You can repeat your tale to him. He will be an impartial judge," said Mr. White. "Are you satisfied?"

"He'll do to begin with," growled David Manning, seating himself upon a chair, and moving his foot restlessly up and down, while he bit his nails to the quick.

Charles White was not long in making his appearance. He walked up to his father without taking any notice of Manning, and said—

"What is it?"

"Sit down, Charles," replied Mr. White.

His son complied with the request, and looked up inquiringly

"*That, Charles, is David Manning, a well-known tramp, trespasser, and poacher—a man whom I have frequently had reason to punish for being found upon my property at a time when decent men are in bed and only rogues abroad.*"

"I have heard of the man," replied Charles, carelessly.

He looked at Manning curiously, as a man looks at a badger the first time he sees one, and wonders what sort of a stand he would make against the dogs if he were baited.

David Manning returned the glance with as much contempt as he could compress into his ill-favoured countenance.

"The man," continued Mr. White, "has acquired the reputation of being slightly insane. Whether he deserves the charge or not you shall judge for yourself, Charles. I had my suspicions before to-day as to the man's sanity, but I must confess that those suspicions have, during the last hour, been more than confirmed. I have no doubt, no moral doubt whatever, that he is a victim of some cerebral disease, and it is our duty to confine him."

David Manning seized the poker as he said this, and shouted—"You keep off. Keep off, or I'll do for you."—

"That, Charles," said Mr. White, "is a specimen of the man's temper and behaviour, but, in addition to that, he has trumped up the most absurd story that ever even a madman invented."

"And what is that?"

"It ain't a story, Mister Charles; by G—, it

"Silence!" cried Mr. White. "You shall say what you like presently, my friend. He came here early this morning, Charles, and told me that he had made a discovery. I humoured him, and asked him to explain his meaning. He said that he had last night by some means broken into my ice-house. You are aware that I had it turned into a sort of reading-room or study some years ago. Workmen came down from London, and I put myself to some expense and trouble about it."

"Yes, I remember," said Charles.

"Well, this David Manning confessed to me that he effected a surreptitious entry last night. He must have been mad to tell me such a thing, because he acknowledges himself to be a burglar, and to have committed a burglarious act, which amounts to a felony."

"Lock him up, then," replied Charles White. "What's the use of palavering with him?"

"Stop a bit; you are, like all young men, too precipitate. He makes the most extraordinary charge against me that ever you heard of."

"Does he though?"

"Yes, indeed. He declares, in short, that Bell Wilson, the daughter——"

"Eh!" cried Charles. "Who did you say?"

"Bell Wilson."

"Well, go on."

"That Bell Wilson, who so strangely disappeared some little time back, is concealed in the ice-house; and detained there at my pleasure, and by my authority."

"Yes. That's it. That's it, Mr. Charles," cried David Manning, with a great deal of gesticulation.

"By Jove!" said Charles, whistling.

"Now, Charles, you are or ought to be an impartial judge. If this girl, Bell Wilson, was in the ice-house last night, it is only a reasonable presumption that she is there still. I am perfectly willing to allow David Manning and yourself to search the building. There is the key. I will even accompany you. I should like to prove him in error, because a charge ought not be made against a man of position like myself, even by a madman. It may be ridiculous; but although in this instance it is supremely so, I should prefer your taking the trouble to visit the ice-house. Judge for yourself."

"What do you say, Manning?" asked Charles.

"I'm willing, sir; come on," replied David.

The three men put on their hats. Mr. White threw open one of the windows, and, stepping upon the lawn, they went off in the direction of the ice-house.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BIRD IS FLOWN.

DAVID MANNING'S mind was in a whirl. He was afraid that he had made some mistake, some error. He almost began to fancy that he had been deluding himself with a false idea—a mental will-o'-the-wisp. But yet he could swear that he had for months and months been engaged in working his way into the ice-house. He could swear that only the night before he had consummated his labours and made an entry. The circular apartment—the fantastic ceiling—the strangely carved furniture—all returned to his memory. He must have been a very vivid dreamer if all these things were but the phantom of an over-heated imagination. In addition to this, he had solemnly declared that he had seen Bell Wilson, whose loss her family and her lover were deploring—seen her in that subterranean chamber—seen her and parleyed with her. He had accused Mr. Weston White in the most distinct manner of being privy to the girl's concealment. He had evidence to adduce in support of his accusation, and he was now going to prove to Mr. White and his son the truth of the strange incomprehensible things he had alleged. Strange misgivings, however, stole over him in spite of his confidence.

Mr. Weston White walked along with his head

erect, his bearing proud, and his manner defiant; and the man could not help thinking that he would hardly be so calm and self-possessed if he were really the culprit and the criminal he was trying all he knew to prove him.

The little party neared the ice-house, and then another reflection flashed across the mind of David Manning. It was just possible that Mr. Weston White had been a little too quick for him, and that everything would end in smoke after all. A sudden flush reddened and burned his cheek, and he became as hot as fire all over. But he would not—he could not—entertain an idea so damnatory to all his plans and schemes were it true. He had not much time left for reflection. The little wicket-gate swung back; the park was traversed; the key was set in the lock; and immediately afterwards the three men stood within the Rotunda.

David Manning, his heart beating like a shuttle, his whole nervous system on the rack, gazed around him. The apartment, save the presence of himself and the two Whites, was empty. He darted forward to the inner room—the door was ajar; he forced it open—there was no one there. A bed stood at one end. The light which came in through the exterior door but dimly illuminated the two rooms.

Mr. Weston White struck a match and set a light to a candle. This with great urbanity he handed to David Manning, saying—

"Satisfy yourself. Search the place."

Snatching the candle with his trembling hands

from those of Mr. White, he searched the place minutely—under the bed, in the bed, in the corner, everywhere. Not a soul was to be seen: not the vestige of an inhabitant, male or female, was there. The bed did not appear to have been slept in. It was made, but not in the least rumpled. David Manning let the candle fall, and staggered like a drunken man into the open air out of the ice-house, along the path, through the wicket, and threw himself down hopelessly upon the greensward. He pressed his hand to his forehead as if to prevent its bursting. Mr. Weston White motioned to his son, and they left the Rotunda. Mr. White locked the door, as was his invariable custom. As Charles was following his father he caught sight of some white thing clinging to a nail in the wall. He hardly knew why, but he reached out his hand and, seizing it, put it in his pocket. They advanced to the half-distracted man, who was lying on the grass. Mr. White tapped him on the shoulder, saying—

"Are you satisfied, my man?"

The sound of his voice seemed to rouse David from his apathy; for, rising to his feet, he replied—

"No, I'm not."

"What more do you want, then? You are hard to please."

"Mr. Charles, you're a genelman."

Charles White turned coldly from him, and treated the half-commenced appeal with silent contempt.

"You're both on you agin me, you are," suddenly screamed David.

They looked at him much as one regards a serpent when you know its poison fangs are drawn.

"You're set agin me," he continued; "but may flames burn me if I'm telling a lie when I say that Squire Weston carried off Bell Wilson, and kep' her shut up in that there cussed house."

"Charles," said Mr. White to his son, "you are convinced, I suppose, of this man's insanity."

"Perfectly."

"I am glad of that. I always like to have a witness. A man's unsupported testimony may be all very well, but two are always better than one. I understand you to say that you are quite satisfied."

"Quite," replied Charles White.

"Very well. Now, my man, I've a word to say to you. According to your own confession, you broke into my ice-house with felonious intent last night. Do you know what punishment the Appleton Bench would provide for you, supposing I were to prosecute you? You have sense enough to see the force of my reasoning, haven't you? As for your absurd story about Bell Wilson, or whatever the girl's name may be, no one would believe you for a moment; and I laugh at you and your threats too. But I don't wish to be hard upon you. I could either transport you or shut you up in a lunatic asylum; but I do not wish to do either. Quit this part of the country; you will never do any good here. Go to London, and put your shoulder to the wheel. Here is a purse containing five pounds, that will start you. The rest depends upon yourself."

David Manning's eyes glistened, not with cupidity, but with rage. Mr. White tossed the purse towards him. He did not offer to catch it, but allowed it to fall down at his feet. Then, with every demonstration of extreme passion, he trampled it into the earth.

"Come, come, don't be a fool!" said Charley White, soothingly.

"Who was a-talking to you?" cried Manning.

"Pick up your money, and do as you're told."

David Manning looked at him savagely for an instant, then he transferred his regards to Mr. White, and crying "I'll be the death on you before we part," dashed forward, with intended murder [illegible] upon his features. Charley White was standing between the man and his father, and seeing the maniacal expression of his eyes and face, met him half-way, and, before his intention could be divined, dealt him a terrific blow behind the ear. Thick as David's skull was, he could not withstand the force with which the young squire struck him. He sighed; then he fell like an oak in a storm, and lay motionless upon the grass.

"Thanks, Charley," said his father, quietly; "that is the best way, after all, to treat such carrion," and, linking his arm in that of his son, father and son returned to the Hall.

Minutes elapsed—many minutes—and still David Manning did not stir. At last he moved, opened his eyes, and finally sat up: but it was some time then before he quite recovered his senses. When he did he looked around him. Finding himself alone, he

staggered to his feet, and picked up the purse of sovereigns. He put it in his pocket, and started slowly off across the park, muttering as he went—

"I'll go to Lunnon, but I'll stick to him. He may rid him of me for a week, for a month, for a year; but I'll stick to him; and I'll let him know that David Manning isn't mud beneath his feet." And he laughed wildly.

CHAPTER XII.

THE COBWEB.

When Charles White was fairly at home once more .—that is in the stables—he thought of the piece of linen, as it then appeared to him. He could hardly examine it as well as he could wish amongst his horses and his grooms. He wished to look at it—he did not know why exactly. If you had questioned him as to his motives, he would have told you it was a whim—idle curiosity.

It was a fine morning, so he took a walk in the fields, and went towards Oak Tree. He proposed to look in upon the farmer, and ask him if he had heard anything of his daughter.

"I will tell him about the mare's nest that David Manning so cleverly manufactured," he said to himself. "It will be an excellent joke, and suffice to make them laugh. Fancy my father, a steady-going old fellow, like a cart-horse in harness, doing such a thing; carrying a girl off, and locking her up in an out-of-the-way place like the ice-house he has made a study of. It is enough to make an owl laugh, let alone a human being. I always thought that fellow Manning was mad—now there is no doubt of it. The governor let him down easy."

The sun was high in the heavens, and Charley White felt oppressed with the heat. Thinking he

would rest for a short time, he sat down under a tree, and thought of the relic he had brought away from the paternal cave of Adullam. He took it out of his pocket and looked at it. It was one of those tiny pocket-handkerchiefs used by women which are sometimes called cobwebs on account of their gauzy appearance and tinsel manufacture. He thought it very odd that the handkerchief should have found its way to the Rotunda, and he began to think that after all David Manning might not have been such a lying madman as his father had evidently wished him to believe him. Charley White, lying on his back under the spreading branches, began to soliloquize—

"It's uncommonly odd that I should have found this cobweb affair in the governor's grotto. It isn't exactly a swell sort of rag, but more the sort of thing that a country girl would use, and I think Manning's accusation was that he had found a girl in the ice-house, the same girl that those two farming swells came over to Appleton about a fortnight ago, and made such a shindy over. Sorry I gave Manning that cut under the ear now. Don't know, though, perhaps it wont do him any harm; teach him to be civil to those who are his betters, and give him an idea of his duty towards his neighbour. Wonder if there's any name on the cobweb." As he said this, Charley White took the handkerchief up, and began to examine it. He turned it over, and looked first at one corner and then at another. Suddenly he exclaimed—

"God bless my soul, what's this?"

There, in small but plain letters, staring him in the face were two names, those two names were Bell Wilson.

"I say," cried Charley White to himself, "here's a go. Why, hang it, upon my word it's uncommon odd. Licks me altogether."

It was a strange discovery for him to make. It was proof presumptive, if not positive, of his father's guilt: and to find out anything derogatory to a parent whom we have always looked up to and regarded with respect, is at all times humiliating.

"Well now," exclaimed Charley, "if an angel from heaven had come down expressly to tell me that the governor had gone in for kidnapping girls and shutting them up in ice-houses, I shouldn't have believed the celestial party, I should have sworn it was a lie; but there cannot be a doubt of it—if I am to believe the evidence of my own senses—which I would much rather not do if I could possibly help it—but I can't. Here it is in black and white, as plain as any A, B, C. I picked this handkerchief up in the grotto, but——" Here another idea struck him, and he said in a different tone—"Perhaps that Manning fellow stole it, and put it there in order to flabbergast the governor. It wouldn't have been a bad dodge, because it looks very seedy, and those poacher fellows don't stick at trifles, as I know. But there's one thing; if he had put it there, wouldn't he have pointed to it when he got inside? As it was, he did nothing of the sort. 'Pon my word, I don't know what to think; it is almost

six of one and half-a-dozen of the other. I should be sorry to think badly of the governor, because he has always been such a steady-going old cock. When that sort of fever, however, does break out, why, they go the whole pig, as I've seen before now. Well, I know what I'll do; I'll have an interview with the old boy, and I think I shall be able to tell from his manner whether he has turned a gay Lothario in his old age. He'll have to be very clever if he hoodwinks me."

He paused a moment and mused. Then he went on. "I don't think I'll go over to Oak Tree now. I should not like to meet the bucolics at this particular moment. I should feel like a sort of Guy Fawkes. A man who knew that—eh? When I begin to wire-draw my sentences I get out of my depth; but it don't matter. I know what I mean if I can't say it. Well, suppose I toddle?"

Getting up, Charles White stretched himself, and was preparing to walk lazily back to the Hall, when, as he turned round, he ran "full tilt," as he expressed it, against Farmer Wilson and Tom Thorburn.

"Morning, farmer," he said, a little confusedly.

"Morning, sir." "Servant, sir," they replied.

"We've been over to t' Hall," said the farmer, "to see you, sir; just to learn if you had heard anything."

Charles did not know what to do or to say. He wasn't in the habit of telling untruths, but this morning he felt himself constrained to tell a lie, and he answered, in a stammering manner—

"No, I have not; I am sorry to say, as far as I am concerned, the thing is *in statu quo*. I was in hopes that you might have gleaned some intelligence."

He summoned up sufficient courage to look at the two men before him. Tom Thorburn was greatly altered for the worse; he was losing flesh, and seemed to be fretting silently. The farmer looked sad and subdued, and appeared to be tottering under the heavy load of shame which he supposed his daughter had heaped about his aged head. Charles could not help feeling shocked as he looked at them, and noticed the alteration a few short weeks had wrought in them.

"If the governor has had a hand in this," he inwardly remarked, "why, hang it, he ought to have a yard and a half of stout cord given him, to apply to a purpose which his conscience cannot fail to suggest."

"It be a bad business, squire," said George Wilson, sadly. "T'ole woman she be a-taking it to heart."

Charley was about to make some reply, when Thorburn darted forward and seized something on the ground; he pounced on it with the rapidity of a hawk upon a sparrow—

"Dang it, mon, look'ee here," he cried, holding up the handkerchief which Charles White had denominated a cobweb, and which he had allowed to fall on the grass, forgetting to put it in his pocket again.

The farmer looked at it, took it from Tom, and turned it over and over.

"This be our gal's," he said at last, whilst his heart beat rapidly.

"Confound the luck," thought Charley. "I would rather have lost fifty pounds than they should have seen that."

"Whereabouts did 'ee get this?" asked the farmer, of Tom.

Tom pointed to the place where he had found it.

The two men looked at one another silently for a brief space. Then George Wilson said, addressing Charles White—

"Squire, what do 'ee know about this?"

"Nothing much," replied Charley, feeling very uncomfortable.

"We mun know," said George Wilson.

"I don't see what right you have to question me, my good fellow."

"We mun know," he repeated sternly.

Charles said nothing.

"I be t' gal's father, and you munna think to get off wi'out speakin'."

"I can make allowance for your feelings," said Charles; "and I don't mind telling you all I know, about it. The fact is, I found it very much in the same way as you yourself have just done."

"Where?" they both said in a breath.

This was a question which Charley White did not know how to answer. If his father were really guilty, he did not want to raise the country, and bring a hornet's nest about his ears. If his father were a thousand times guilty, it would be a very ungracious thing for his son to publicly gibbet him, and he resolved to tell them nothing. He knew that by being silent they would suspect him, but he thought

philosophically that it was his bad luck to have got into a dilemma, and the best thing he could do was to get out of it again as well as he could. So he said—

"I can tell you no more than I have told you before. I found it—it does not matter where."

"You mun say," replied the farmer, stoutly.

"I shall say nothing, my good fellow," said Charles White; "and if you think to bull me, you never made a greater mistake in your life."

"Come, squire, you had better speak up," continued the farmer.

"I tell you I shall say nothing. I have answered you to the best of my ability. I found it; where, does not matter. It may seem odd that I should have a handkerchief of your daughter's about me; but if you are inclined to suspect me of a knowledge of your daughter's whereabouts, why you may."

Charley could not stand before them, and tell them on his honour as a gentleman he did not know anything. So he made a milk-and-water answer, which was the best he could think of under the circumstances. Without taking any further notice of them, he turned on his heel and walked away. But there was a step behind him, and a spring. A hand was laid upon his collar, and a strong arm dragged him back. Tom Thorburn held him in a grip of iron, and confronted him with the farmer.

"Thee had best speak," said Tom, between his teeth.

When Charley White had recovered from his astonishment at so strange and sudden a proceeding, he saw it was full time for action. Tom was at present his gaoler, and looked the personification

of brute force. The farmer tacitly approved of his violence; for he was bristling up as it were with anxiety and impatience. Charles White had not been to college for nothing: he had not taken to athletic sports for nothing: he had not paid Jemmy Shaw close upon twenty pounds for nothing. This Tom Thorburn was not long in finding out, for Charley with a sudden twist put one of his legs behind one of Tom's; then he brought his left fist down with crushing force upon Tom's undefended face. Tom let go his hold of the squire's collar, and rolled heavily on to the grass. It was a realization of the line, "Procumbit humi bos." Charley gave himself a shake after performing this feat, and stood upon the defensive. Tom rose slowly to his feet, wiped the blood off his face with the back of his hand, and squared up to Charles. Then science was matched against brute force, and the slaughter began—for it was nothing else. In spite of his immense strength, Tom Thorburn was but a child in Charles White's hands, and soon with his face so altered that his own mother wouldn't have known him, he was sitting down under a tree dead beat.

The farmer had taken no part in the conflict; he was too old to do so.

"Sorry for it, farmer; wasn't my fault," said Charles White. "The beggar would have it, and he's got it."

The farmer, with the utmost humility, went up to Charles and said in imploring accents—

"For the love of God, gie me back my child, Mr. White. I be her father, sir; think o' that. Do! She were the child o' my old age. I hanna long to live. You

would na ha' me go down to the churchyard, sir, a dishonoured mon. She be all I ha' got, sir. There be others—fine leddies, sir. They be for you. Not a poor lamb as is fit for nothing but a dairy. Gie her back, Mr. White. If she be dishonoured I'll ha' her. Better come back like that than not at all. Think o' a father's feeling, sir. You need not be afeared o' the child, sir, coming to harm. If it be grown, I'll keep it and treat it like one o' my own; but gie me back t' gal, Mr. Charles. I'll bless you for it. I'll forgie you everything if you'll only let me ha' me darter once more. I am but a simple farmer, sir; but do 'ee take pity on me. I be old, Mr. Charles, and I canna stand these things. It be killing I and the missis too; an' as for t' lad there, he be nigh frantic about it."

"Farmer," said Charles, taking his proffered hand, "I give you my word as a gentleman and a man of honour, that I had nothing whatever to do with the abduction of your child. I will see if I can find out anything about her. If I can, you shall hear it, and I will go heart and soul with you in trying to get her back again."

The farmer looked down on the ground sorrowfully, and said, "God judge atwixt us."

Charles wrung the old man's hand, and walked quickly away. Once he turned his head. There was the old farmer leaning heavily on his staff, with his eyes cast down. Close to him sat Tom Thorburn, chewing the cud of bitter reflection.

"Such is life," muttered Charles, and walked quicker.

CHAPTER XIII.

FATHER AND SON.

When Charles reached the Hall he went straight to the library, where he thought he should meet his father. He was not mistaken; Weston White was seated in an arm-chair, reading a telegram, which he held in his hand. His face was puckered up into an expression of great displeasure. Some thing had evidently seriously annoyed him.

"Are you busy?" asked Charles, as he threw his hat down on the table, and took a chair.

"Yes, I am," was the sharp reply. "I wish you would make it convenient to come some other time."

"Sorry I can't. I've got something on my mind, and I must have it out with you at once."

"With me?"

"Yes."

"Well, I suppose I must put up with your eccentricities and your overbearing manner. Only in my time, sons had a little more regard for their fathers, and studied them a little more than you do me."

"That's all very well," said Charles; "but the fact is, I have been thinking about what that fellow David Manning said about Bell Wilson."

"Curse Bell Wilson!" muttered Mr. Weston White, but not loud enough for his son to hear.

"Now, I'll bet a new hat," said Charley, "that what I am going to say will interest you more than you care to confess."

"Go on then," replied his father. "Make as much haste as you can."

"All right," said Charley. "Now, look here, governor, I don't want to pick holes in your coat; but if I am right in my conclusions, I must say that I think you have behaved in a devilish seedy manner."

Mr. Weston White started at this, and moved uneasily in his chair.

"Perhaps," he said, "before you pass sentence upon me in that decided manner you will be good enough to state the case; and as I have not the benefit of counsel, allow me to defend myself as well as I can. By George! things *have* come to a pretty pass when a fellow, who hasn't left college above a year or so, should sit in judgment on his father, and tell him in a cool, off-hand sort of way that he has behaved in a devilish seedy manner! Pretty pass, by George!"

Mr. White said this bitterly.

"Don't cut up, governor," said Charles; "you shall have your go in presently. I'll soon tell you what I'm driving at. You know that David Manning accused you this morning of having carried off Bell Wilson, and shut her up in your ice-house?"

"Absurd on the face of it!" exclaimed Mr. Weston White.

"Maybe; I don't say it isn't; only I have heard a few things, and I have put them together to the best of my ability, and I want to hear what you have to say to them. Some weeks ago Farmer Wilson came to me with a fellow called Tom Thorburn, a yokel I was under the painful necessity just now of punishing rather severely. Well, they began to pitch a tale to me about Bell Wilson having disappeared, and Tom swore that he had heard a conversation between Bell and Mrs. Brown."

"Mrs. Brown!" cried Weston White.

"Yes, the housekeeper; during which she said something about it being better to marry a gentleman than a country bumpkin. I thought nothing of that, and told them that I was the worst person they could come to, as I knew nothing about the girl."

"Quite right."

"So I thought at the time; but I made another discovery this morning. When we went to the ice-house I picked a handkerchief off the wall. It had caught against a nail or something, and hung there. Why I took it I don't know, but I did. I afterwards looked at it, and I saw Bell Wilson's name on it. Now that, coupled with what David Manning said, looks fishy—doesn't it?"

"You ought to have been a detective, my boy," said Mr. White, who appeared ill at his ease.

"That is not all: wait a bit. That same cobweb got me into a mess. While I was looking at it, who should come up but Tom Thorburn and the farmer. Tom caught sight of the rag, and asked

me where I got it. I didn't want to show you up, so I wouldn't tell them. They tried to make me, and Tom got a very decent hiding; but the mischief is, they may go about and swear that I have got the girl. Don't you see?"

"Well, anything else?" said Weston White, stoically.

"No; I've done. Now, what have *you* got to say?"

"Tell me plainly what the conclusion is that you have come to."

"It is this," replied Charley. "I hope I am not doing you an injustice in saying so; but I cannot help thinking that you *did* carry the girl off, and that she *was* shut up in your ice-pit, and that by some means or other you got her off early this morning."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. Now you have the whole of it."

"Very well; then listen to me."

"I'm listening," replied Charles.

"You are perfectly right in your conjectures," said Mr. Weston White, looking his son in the face.

"The devil! but why?"

"Don't ask any questions. I am not the first man who has made a fool of himself over a woman. You have got the fact, let that suffice you."

"Where is she now?" asked Charles.

"I don't know."

"Come, governor, draw it mild with me. What's the good of humbugging?"

"I never was more serious," replied Mr. White. 'Read that.'

He tossed the telegram he had hitherto held crumpled up in his hand over to him.

Charles unfolded it, and read it. It was very brief. It was as follows :—

"The girl escaped this morning in the crowd at the railway station. I shall wait at the Euston Hotel till I hear from you."

Mrs. Brown sent this to Weston White, Esquire, of Appleton Hall.

"That's comfortable," remarked Charley, as he gave the telegram back to his father.

"Yes. Isn't it?" replied Mr. White. "I was just thinking what was to be done when you came in. You see, owing to your unfortunate discovery of the pocket-handkerchief, we are in the same boat. Suspicion will fall upon you; and the fat will be in the fire completely if the girl should return down here."

"Do you think she will? Have you any reason to think so?" asked Charles, a little anxiously.

"I will tell you exactly what I think. I shut the girl up in the ice-house, for I did not know what else to do with her. The proposal I made to her was to go up to London and be my mistress, but she would not hear of it. Neither my threats nor promises were of any avail, and I made no progress whatever with her. She was as inflexible as a rock, and as virtuous as a Claudia. Well, things were in this state, and I was thinking what I could do with her, when I went early this morning to see her, and propose that she should go home to Oak Tree again, and say that she had been staying

with some friends at Coventry for a fortnight. This she would not hear of; she declared that she would never go home again; she knew what they would think of her; she would rather go up to London, and make her way in the world somehow or other—by dressmaking or some other occupation that virtuous females in distress fall back upon. I noticed something odd in her manner, and I also, at the same time, remarked the hole that scoundrel had made through which to effect an entry; by dint of questioning, she confessed that David Manning had been there, and that he had promised to liberate her. When I heard that, I sent her off to London immediately under Mrs. Brown's escort, until I could think what was best to be done with her. The fool has allowed the bird to fly, as you saw by that telegram; and now you know the whole state of affairs. What is to be done? I am open to any suggestions."

"From what you have said," replied Charles, "I don't think she will come back; but there is no telling what women will do: they are 'kittle-cattle.' But if you want my advice, I should say the best thing to be done is to let her go. Send for Mrs. Brown back again, and wait and see what will turn up. If she comes back, I don't think she will say she has been shut up in your ice-house. She must be well enough acquainted with the charitable nature of the female portion of the community, to know what they will say about her when they hear that."

"Very true."

"Well, then, stand on your dignity; and if any rumours get about, put the rumourers to the proof. What is the good of a reputation like yours if you cannot afford to defy calumny?"

"By George, you talk like an oracle, Charles! I will take your advice. Perhaps you will ride over to Appleton, and telegraph for Mrs. Brown to come back directly."

Charles promised to do so; and after some further conversation of a trivial nature, left the room, saddled his horse himself, and rode over to the railway station.

And thus the young and honourable man was, by the force of circumstances, linked with his father in a conspiracy to keep an honest family in the depths of misery, despair, and shame.

CHAPTER XIV.

"SIT DOWN, CHILD; THIS IS MY HOUSE, AND I AM MRS. JAMES."

When Bell Wilson ran away from Mrs. Brown at the Euston-square railway-station, she only obeyed an instinct of her nature which was predominant at the time; it said to her—"Escape from that woman—escape in any way that offers itself—she is your enemy; she has betrayed you once, she will do so again; trust her not an inch; she has told you lies. Be on your guard therefore against her." Following her instinctive promptings, she took advantage of the first opportunity which offered itself, and ran away. There was a great crowd at the station; people were crowding about a particular spot, in order to look after their luggage. Here Bell and her keeper were separated; Bell by chance found her way out of the station, and taking the first turning which presented itself, she in a few minutes found herself in the New-road. She was bewildered with the spectacle of activity which presented itself. Had she known that a locomotive was rolling along beneath her feet, she would have been terrified, but at present the mysteries and wonders of London were a sealed book to her. The knife was even then between the pages, but no hand was present to guide its onward course. She

had no money, she had no friends, she had never in her life been for one hour in London. One great, irresistible, overwhelming idea, however, had taken possession of her mind, and that was, that Mrs. Brown was a bad woman, and she must escape from her. Not daring to look behind her, for fear that her pursuer might be at her heels, she hurried on, crossed the New-road, and entered the labyrinth of squares which lie east of Tottenham-court-road. She had heard that many trades were carried on, and many businesses followed in London, and she hoped that she might be able to find employment in some shape or other. She did not for an instant entertain the idea of returning to Oak Tree, to be looked coldly upon by her friends and relations—that was a last and very bitter alternative; she could not have put it in execution if she had been inclined to do so, as she was utterly without means. There was only one thing upon which she could congratulate herself, and that was, that she had escaped out of the wolf's den—that she had gone through the fire, and come scathless out of the trying ordeal. She dared not stop, so went on—never stopping, never hesitating—through those dreary, quiet squares, until she reached Bloomsbury. Still on, looking up wonderingly at such a succession of big houses, unutterably grand to her simple imagination; still on, almost gladsomely, because she was free. Anything would be preferable to the solitary confinement she had endured—confinement only enlivened by the hateful society of Mr. Weston White, whom she abhorred from the very bottom

of her soul. Still on, anywhere, she cared not whither, as long as she escaped the vigilance and the pursuit of Mrs. Brown, who had beguiled her in the first instance. As she thought hurriedly over her position, she was still more confirmed in her determination not to return home; for she reflected, and with some show of reason, that Mr. Weston White might once more put his evil machinations in motion, and endeavour to entrap her again. She would fly from the detested neighbourhood, and let her friends know, as soon as she could, that she was alive and well. Still on, across Oxford-street, into the densely-populated and reeking neighbourhood of St. Giles's, until she stood at the top of the spacious thoroughfare of the Haymarket. Here she leaned wearily against a lamp-post, and looked around her; she was faint and hungry. It was yet early morning, as she had come up to town by the first train. But few people were about, and those were chiefly mechanics and clerks going to their respective avocations; occasionally a drunken man or woman would reel by, and that was all. The sun was beginning to penetrate the smoke of the great city, and its glad beams seemed to mock her misery as they fell, in all their native richness, upon the pavement. She had not time to fall into a very deep reverie, for a decently-dressed old woman passed her, but apparently struck by her dress and appearance, stopped, looked at her, passed her again, and finally walked up and addressed her.

"A nice morning, my dear," she said.

Bell looked up, and replied monosyllabically in the affirmative.

"You look tired," said the old woman.

"A little," replied Bell, with a sigh so full of meaning that even the old woman was struck by it.

She interpreted it to mean "Desertion!" But clever though she undoubtedly was, she was mistaken.

"You're thinking of going home, maybe?"

"I have no home," said Bell, simply.

"As I thought," muttered the stranger.

"Have you breakfasted?" she asked.

"No."

"If I might venture so far, I'd ask you to come and have a cup of tea with me; it would do you good, I should think."

"Who are you?"

"Well, my dear, I'm nobody perticklar. But I hope I'm good enough."

"What are you?" persisted Bell.

"I'm a lodging-house keeper, my dear, and my crib——" here she coughed—"that is, my little place, isn't far from here—only round the corner and down the next street."

Bell looked at her. But she was so simple, so unsuspecting, so thoroughly rustic, that she only thought the woman was doing her a kindness which she would have herself done to anyone she thought was destitute, miserable, and homeless.

"Yes," she said, "I shall be glad to come with you and sit down for half-an-hour, till I can collect my thoughts a little. I have no money, so I cannot

pay you just yet; I will, though, if you expect payment for any little kindness you may show me, do my best to work and make some money."

"Don't talk about that, my dear. I thought you looked tired, and so I offered you a cup of tea; it is nothing. Come along; I will show you the way."

Two policemen who were standing by looked at one another and laughed, and one remarked—

"If this 'ere character don't deserve a twelvemonth, I never see one as did."

Bell did not overhear this, but followed her guide to a street which contained a row on either side of dingy-looking three-storied houses. Before one of these her conductor stopped, and the door being ajar, she gave it a push, and after admitting Bell, passed her in the passage, and showed her into a sitting-room. There were a few tawdry pictures of the French and German school on the walls. A thick blind of gauze over the window prevented scrutiny from without. Some common Staffordshire images stood upon the mantelpiece. Old-fashioned furniture adorned the apartment, and pointing to an aged damask sofa, the old woman motioned Bell to be seated, saying—

"Sit down, child. This is my house, and I am Mrs. James."

CHAPTER XV.

BELL AND THE DRAGON.

MRS. JAMES went to a cupboard, and produced a bottle which bore a label, upon which was a pictorial representation of a feline animal in the act of erecting its back and extending its tail.

"Have a drop of this, child," exclaimed Mrs. James; "it's only white satin, and wont hurt you."

She poured out a glass of gin, and gave it to Bell, who, utterly ignorant of the meaning of the phrase "white satin," in an ill-advised moment applied her lips to it; but she soon put down the glass with a sigh and a shiver, saying—

"Thank you, I do not like spirits; I would rather have some tea or some coffee."

Mrs. James looked disgusted, but promised compliance with this modest request, and in a short time Bell's wants were provided for. While the girl was having her breakfast, Mrs. James carried on a running fire of inquiries.

"You have been in London some time, my dear, I suppose?" she said, artfully suggesting, what she knew was not the fact, in order to get a more emphatic denial.

"I only arrived this morning," said Bell, her mouth full of bread and butter.

"Oh!" Mrs. James contented herself with this

exclamation. There is nothing like a judicious reticence to draw a person out, especially if it be an inexperienced one.

"I have left my home," said Bell; and then she went on eating in a way that surprised Mrs. James, who forgot that she had a country girl fresh and hale and hearty to deal with.

Mrs. James was compelled to give up the idea of getting any voluntary information from Bell, so she went on with her interrogations.

"Shall you stop long in London?"

"I think so; I want to get some work to do."

"Well, I shall be glad to accommodate you, and I shall not bother you about the money until you are beginning to earn some. I can let you have a room cheap."

"Oh! thank you," said Bell; "I am very much obliged to you."

"I'm sure you're welcome, child. It's as good for me as for you. Go on with your breakfast, I'll look in again presently."

Mrs. James went away, but she had not gone far before she met some one in the passage. An altercation ensued, which was plainly audible to Bell.

"I've been looking for you," said a female voice.

"Well, what's your little game now?"

"Nothing much; only I'm going to cut this hole. I'm sick and tired of it."

"You wont cut it!" said Mrs. James, in a decided tone, "not till it suits me, my dear."

"Wont I?"

"No; not if I know it."

"You can't stop me."

"Can't I, though?" said Mrs. James. "Who's dressed you, eh? Who's fed you this ever so long? Whose clothes have you got on now?—tell me that."

"Well, if you have done all that, you've been well paid for it."

"Don't talk to me about well paid."

"Well, I shall go, and that's flat."

"You try it on," said Mrs. James, jeeringly.

The woman tried to pass Mrs. James in the passage. A struggle took place, and the woman, followed by Mrs. James, entered the room in which Bell was sitting, and sat down on a chair. The exertion seemed to have affected the young woman in an injurious manner; for she coughed a short hacking cough, and pulling a cambric handkerchief from her pocket, she put it to her mouth, and presently withdrew it covered with blood. A hectic flush spread over her cheek, and bore the crimson tell-tale stain of consumption. She was a poor emaciated-looking creature, not more than four-and-twenty, if so much. There were traces of beauty upon her pallid countenance. She had once been very pretty; but how altered! how changed! It was the old, old story of the wages of sin. When her fit of coughing was over, she looked up, and noticing Bell, she kept her eyes fixed on her for some seconds, as if trying to remember if she had ever seen her face before. Apparently she had not; for she did not seem to recognise her.

"Who are you?" she said.

"What's that to you? Get out of my house," cried Mrs. James.

"Who are you?" she repeated.

"I have just come from the country," replied Bell. "I am the daughter of a farmer."

"Do you know where you are?" the woman exclaimed, much excited.

"At Mrs. James's lodging-house, I believe," replied Bell.

"Mrs. Fiddlesticks! Look at me. Five years ago I was like you—young and good-looking. Now you see what I am, and all through women like that before you. I went to church the other night. I know I'm not long for this world, and I thought I'd just drop in at that church in Windmill-street—it's handy enough. It was Sunday-night, but I passed it at first, and went up to the Argyll Rooms, which are not a dozen yards farther on. Well, I went back, and entered the church. The parson was talking about wretches like Mrs. James, as she has called herself to you, and he said they were the incarnation of the seven deadly sins; and so they are—devil take them."

Mrs. James did all she could to interrupt this speech, but her efforts were of no avail; so she contented herself with tapping her forehead, and pointing to the girl who was speaking, as much as to say—

"She is mad; do not pay any attention to her."

Bell was strangely interested in all this; she was a little frightened at the girl's vehemence, but she began to have her doubts about Mrs. James's respectability.

"*Get out of this,*" *continued the girl;* "*I don't* want to talk about souls, I don't feel good enough for that, but if you care anything about what women usually prize, go—go, before you are further involved."

"What do you mean?" asked Bell, getting really alarmed.

"She means nothing, my dear, she's drunk," exclaimed Mrs. James, who, going up to the girl, laid hold of her by the arm, and tried to drag her out of the room.

Then the struggle was renewed. At last it ended as before. A fit of coughing came on. The hectic flush grew brighter, and, bleeding profusely, the unfortunate victim of a man's lies, and many a woman's villanies and extortion, suffered herself to be driven from the room.

Bell got up and followed the combatants. Her suspicions were aroused, and she began to think that in escaping from Mrs. Brown she had only fallen from the frying-pan into the fire. The woman was leaning against the wall, and trying to stanch the hæmorrhage with her handkerchief. The flow of blood prevented her from speaking.

"What is it, my dear?" said Mrs. James, blandly, when she perceived Bell.

"I want to go," she said, hastily.

"Well, you can't," was the lady's reply.

"Can't! Why not?"

"Because I don't choose it. I want you. I've got you and I'll keep you."

Bell stood irresolute, not knowing what to do.

The woman who had befriended her before, and

advised her to fly from the place she was at present in, heard the colloquy, and summoning up all her strength for a last effort, sprung at Mrs. James, seized her with the ferocity of a tigress, and shouted huskily to Bell—

"Go. Go quick; the door is open."

Bell waited no longer. She ran forward, opened the door, which was not locked, darted into the street, and ran as fast as she could in the direction of Regent-street. Had she stopped to witness the consequences of the poor woman's chivalric interference, she would have been very much shocked.

Mrs. James, frantic with rage and disappointment, soon succeeded in overpowering the weak and fragile girl who had attacked her, and dashing her head against the wall with great violence, she allowed her to fall upon the oilcloth of the passage, senseless and bleeding. Still bleeding, losing those precious drops of blood, of which she had so few to waste, she was afterwards carried upstairs, and laid upon a dusty mattress, and never left that ill-fated house, until they took her, gasping for breath, to the nearest hospital. In four-and-twenty hours after she had so opportunely interfered to save Bell from something worse than death, she was lying on the table of the dissecting-room, with more than one scalpel gleaming in its case beside her inanimate body.

A strange satire on human life—on the life of one who had for years been Lost to her Home!

CHAPTER XVI.

A MAGASIN DE MODES.

BELL was once more adrift. She knew that she had escaped a dreadful, horrible danger, and she was thankful to God for it. Her perceptions were keen, but her power of analyzation was not strong enough to enable her to define the exact nature of the peril she had succeeded in flying from. She had seen it, as it were; dressed and veiled, and she did not wish to lay bare the skeleton in all its naked hideousness. The glimpse she had caught of it was sufficiently shocking and repulsive. How she pitied the unfortunate girl who had, with so much bravery, interfered on her behalf! Probably by so doing she had aggravated her own misery and lamentable condition. A shudder, deep and heart-felt, thrilled through her, as she thought over that misspent life only too plainly drawing to a close. The cough, the hectic, the blood-red stain upon the white cambric. Her head swam, and her brain reeled—a vertigo took possession of her. She walked along mechanically—seen, but not seeing. The people in the streets passed her, and thronged the pavement, but she saw them only as in a confused dream. Black specks floated before her eyes—everything passed before her in phantasmagorian confusion. She pressed her hand to her brow—she

staggered—she fell, with the forepart of her body upon the mat before a shop-door, the rest of it on the flagstones. It was what I should call a shop for the sale of mantles and other feminine things to wear. It called itself a *Magasin de Modes*, and the words *à Paris* were prominently displayed. It was much too early for any customers to pay a visit to the *Magasin;* in fact, the shutters had not long been taken down. A dirty-looking shopman was engaged in dusting the windows, and in other ways making the *Magasin* look as smart as he could. This masculine Cinderella did not see Bell fall down, nor did he hear the low moan which accompanied her lapse into insensibility, but he was not slow to perceive that a small crowd had assembled round the door. Muttering to himself, "It's some of them conjuring chaps," he moved slowly towards the group, whose dimensions were gradually swelling. He had not gone far before he saw Bell lying on the ground.

"Here's a go!" he cried. "I say, is she dead?" he added, appealing to the nearest bystander.

"How should I know? You had better take her in and see. It's a shame to let her lie here," was the reply.

"Been on the spree and got blind drunk, I should say," suggested another independent member of an enterprising British public.

"That's about the size of it, I'll go bail," chimed in another.

"Been a lushing," said a fourth, carrying out the idea of the second speaker, though not in quite such elegant English.

"Come, take her in, young counter-jumper," said the first who had spoken.

The blood of a race of counter-jumpers fired at the insult, but prudence, another characteristic of the said race, interfered. The insulter was a tall, powerful man, who could have put at least one generation of jumpers under his arm, whilst the insulted was of stunted growth, and by no means of the number of the athletes. So, with the man's assistance, he carried her into the *Magasin*, and laid her upon the floor, ringing a bell for the attendance of the proprietress, who soon made her appearance. She was a clever little woman, who saw the position of affairs at a glance. But before she bestowed the least attention upon the insensible girl, she walked to the door, about which a motley crowd had assembled, and without the least ceremony slammed the door in their faces. Then she returned to Bell.

"What's this?" she said.

The man who had assisted to bring the girl in explained as well as he could.

"Oh! fainted upon my doorstep; rather inconvenient. Here, John, run upstairs and bring the vinegar."

John departed on his mission, and Mrs. Tomlinson turned her attention to the stranger. She eyed him from his head to his feet, and not being oversatisfied with the scrutiny, she said—

"Soon bring her to, and send her home to her friends. Ought to be much obliged. A fine day. Good morning."

The man hesitated, as if he did not know whether

he was expected to go or not, but Mrs. Tomlinson soon dissipated all doubts upon that subject which might have clung to his too-confiding mind by going up to the door, opening it, and saying—

"This is the way out. Good morning."

The man muttered something. Mrs. Tomlinson smiled, and said to the few people who still lingered outside—

"Only a faint, good people."

The man passed out, sighed at not being able to intrude his Anglican nose any further in somebody else's business, and pursued his way, looking out for the next adventure which benignant fates might condescend to send him.

Mrs. Tomlinson went back to Bell, and rubbed her face and forehead with the vinegar. Bell in a short time opened her eyes, and stared wildly about her. In time she sat up in a chair, and drank a little drop of brandy that was given her. Mrs. Tomlinson did not bore her with any questions. She was a good Samaritan after her manner. The girl had fainted on her threshold, and she had brought her to again; that was sufficient for her. She did not want to know who or what the girl was. She felt that she should be able to go through the Church Service with a better conscience on the next Sunday because "One of them was sick, and she had ministered unto her."

"Now, my dear, do you feel well enough to go to your work, or whatever your destination may be?"

Bell caught hold of Mrs. Tomlinson's sleeve, and said, in piteous accents—

"Oh! don't, please—please, please don't send me away from you."

"Why not? Your friends will miss you," replied Mrs. Tomlinson, still practical.

"I have no friends—I am alone. I am so miserable. Oh! I shall die if you drive me away from you, I know I shall. I shall kill myself."

"Kill yourself! That's very wrong. Such thoughts are instigated by Satan himself."

Bell burst into a fit of weeping which threatened to break her heart, so deep were the sobs.

Mrs. Tomlinson tried to soothe and comfort her as well as she could, and in time succeeded.

Bell seized her hand a second time when she had a little recovered her serenity, and renewed her fervent appeal.

"Let me work for you," she exclaimed; "let me do anything for you. I will not ask for money. Give me something to eat and drink, if it is only bread and water, and some straw in a garret to sleep on, and I will bless you for it."

This proposition rather pleased Mrs. Tomlinson, who was fond of her money, and it also looked like a little more of the Samaritan business. But a doubt entered her mind. Who was she? Was it a clever trick on the part of a gang of thieves?—was she a bad woman? These were weighty inquiries, and Mrs. Tomlinson was too practical to overlook them.

"Can you give me a reference," she asked, "from your last place, or from any one who knows you?"

"I know no one," was the sorrowful reply. "I only came to London this morning."

Mrs. Tomlinson's face clouded.

"Much as I should like to befriend anybody in distress," she said, "I cannot do so at my own expense. I am afraid I can do nothing for you, young woman, unless I know something about you."

This was said coldly and sternly, and Bell's heart sank within her.

"I can only tell you my story," she said. "If you believe me, try me; if not, I suppose the river will be more kind."

"Don't, don't talk like that, I can't allow it," said Mrs. Tomlinson. "Well, let me hear your story, as you call it. John, go on with your cleaning; it's like your impertinence to stand there, trying to listen to everything that is said. Go away this instant, you wont get your work done till twelve o'clock, I know."

John went off with the proverbial flea in his ear.

"Now, my dear."

"I come from Warwickshire," began Bell.

"Indeed; that is my county."

"Thank goodness," said Bell. "Then you may know some of the towns about there. My father is a farmer at Appleton, and I have been driven from his house because our landlord took a fancy to me, and persecuted me, and I dare not now go home again."

"What is the name of your landlord?"

"Squire Weston White."

"The banker?"

"Yes."

"I believe you, my dear. You have told me enough," replied Mrs. Tomlinson. "I will employ you on the terms you mentioned."

Sharp practice and philanthropy often run in couples.

"You shall be one of my models. I shall show you, and you will have to wait in the show-rooms all day. Your figure is good, and you will make a capital model."

"Oh! thank you, thank you," cried Bell, rapturously. "May Heaven reward you, for I feel that I never can!"

"There, there, that will do; come up-stairs and lie down for an hour. Then I will dress you, and tell you what you will have to do."

After a storm comes a calm, and many a harbour of refuge is discovered in an unknown shore.

CHAPTER XVII.

LORD SHORNCLIFFE.

It was a wet and miserable morning. What few equipages ventured to tempt the mud of the thoroughfares, were bespattered and grimed with that most adhesive of all London productions. The windows of the carriages were pulled up, and the dampness of the respiration resolved itself into little globules, or trickled down in a sluggish stream. The rain pelted down in an incessant shower, against which umbrellas were but a poor protection. On that morning, at least, the words pedestrians and drowned rats were synonymous. At three o'clock the rain was still steadily descending.

Bell had been thoroughly inducted into the mysteries of her new avocation. She was a mere automaton, a shape, a block, a joss. All she had to do was to drape herself with the finery that Mrs. Tomlinson's customers were graciously pleased to look at. Her predecessor in the art had, she was told in confidence, proved herself unworthy of Mrs. Tomlinson's patronage. She had mysteriously disappeared one day, and they could only guess what had become of her. Their suspicions were confirmed, after the lapse of a few days, through the preternatural shopman we have before had occasion

to allude to, who saw her driving in a brougham with a military gentleman by her side, and, added Mrs Tomlinson, *solemnly*—

"Let that girl's fate be a warning to you, my dear. The shameless hussy has gone her way; and we all know where such a path will lead her to."

Bell timidly replied that she hoped she had more respect for herself.

Mrs. Tomlinson was pleased with Bell, who was quiet and unassuming; and then she got her for nothing. The poor child was not, strictly speaking, either happy or contented. She had written to Oak Tree, but without giving her address in town. She had confined herself to stating that she was well, and getting an honest livelihood. Some day, she said, she might tell them the cause of her going away so strangely, but not at present.

She began to look a little pale and wan, through being shut up in smoky London; but as far as her personal appearance went, it had a beneficial effect upon her. She was too much like a country girl before—too round, too jocund, too rosy; now, she became more genteel.

Going to the window on this pluvious morning, Bell exclaimed—

"Oh! how it rains! what dreadful weather!"

While she stood contemplating the rushing gutter-stream, and the draggled-tailed women, who walked along in a heart-broken manner, a handsome equipage dashed up to the door. A powdered flunkey jumped down from the foot-board, and, with

a dash and a clatter, let down the steps, opened the door, and with the utmost suavity, held a large umbrella under which his lady might walk into the *Magasin*.

A young man, about nineteen, got out first, and then helped his mother, Lady Shorncliffe, out, and followed her into the shop. Her ladyship was well known to Mrs. Tomlinson; she was an excellent customer of hers. The young man was her ladyship's only child. His father had died when he was young, and he was Lord Shorncliffe. His trustees allowed him three thousand a-year; because they knew, if they did not, that he would borrow, or raise money in some way. He was in the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadier Guards, which regiment he had entered a year ago, on leaving Eton. He looked very delicate, and very handsome. He wore his hat a little on one side, and he had a habit of playing with his silky moustache; which was so slender and gauzy, that if he had not called attention to it in this manner, would never have been noticed. He was as well dressed as Poole could turn him out, and what jewellery he wore was the handsomest Tessier could design and make for him. He lounged languidly into the *Magasin*, and followed his mother upstairs into the show-rooms. Mrs. Tomlinson excelled herself in doing the affable and the polite, and her excessive civility bordered on the servile; but titles and wealth will always command homage at the hands of a shopkeeper.

Shorncliffe walked to the window, and stood

listlessly gazing out at the rain; then he turned round, and stared at Bell. At Lady Shorncliffe's request, Bell tried on a great many mantles and cloaks, but her ladyship did not see one she liked until Mrs. Tomlinson brought out a jacket made of Genoa velvet and trimmed with Grebe.

"Sweetly pretty," said Lady Shorncliffe. Then she turned to her son, and exclaimed—

"How do you like this, Arthur?"

He was pleased to reply that he thought "it would do," and then he went on looking at Bell. She had not noticed him until now, and as she stole a sidelong glance at him, she could not help thinking how very handsome and gentlemanly he was. He turned to the window again after a while, and taking up a pencil that lay on a table, he was apparently engaged in drawing gigantic grenadiers in impossible bearskins.

Lady Shorncliffe ordered the jacket trimmed with Grebe to be sent to her house in Carlton Gardens, and then motioning to her son, swept downstairs, followed by Mrs. Tomlinson, who, as her ladyship had not asked the price of the jacket in question, intended to charge twenty guineas for it, although she would have sold it for sixteen to anyone else.

As Lord Shorncliffe passed by Bell, he just touched her hand, and contrived to slip a piece of paper into it. Then he followed his mother, and soon the coroneted carriage drove off. Bell, with the instinct of a woman, hastily put the note, if it were a note, into the pocket of her dress. Mrs.

Tomlinson was in high spirits on her return from downstairs, and bored Bell with her silly and uninteresting conversation. Bell was dying to look at that tiny piece of paper, and her hand frequently wandered to her pocket, and she grasped it nervously; as she did so, a blush would suffuse her face.

The afternoon passed, and she was the whole time in a state of fluttering expectation to know what so handsome a young gentleman and a lord, as she had heard Mrs. Tomlinson say, could have to say to her. At five o'clock, Mrs. Tomlinson went downstairs to have her tea. As they could not both be spared at once, Bell was left alone to attend to anyone who might come in; then was her time. Retreating to the window, and taking especial care that no one should see her, she took the piece of paper out of her pocket, unfolded it with trembling hands, and read it. The contents were characteristic of the young nobleman who wrote it. He had scribbled—

"I say, meet me in the Burlington to-morrow afternoon 'bout five," that was all.

At first, Bell felt angry that he had dared to make her such a proposition, but when his handsome face came before her, she could not find it in her heart to be angry with him. It is strange that Cupid in the form of Adonis has so much more power with women than Cupid in the form of Caliban. But good looks all the world over are worth more than ugliness and money; and when the two, good looks and money, are combined, and

a title is thrown into the scale, they are irresistible. Bell tried to feel very much insulted, but although she did her best, and worried herself till she went to bed that night, she could not, in spite of her self, help feeling flattered. So vanity triumphed over the vexation of spirit.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHERE IS THE BURLINGTON?

THE next morning the conflict in Bell's mind recommenced, and lasted during the entire day. At last she compounded with her conscience by assuring herself that there could be no moral harm in her meeting the young nobleman, and hearing what he had to say to her. Tom Thorburn was totally forgotten; perhaps his image might have ventured to obtrude itself upon her mind, but directly she saw it on the mental threshold she dismissed it, if not with scorn, at least with impatience. It was a subject of wonderment with her how she could ever have been so infatuated as to take any notice of a common working-man, for although Tom was the son of a farmer, still he had to work in the fields for his living, as his father only farmed in a small way. Bell imagined that there must be something in her of which she had hitherto remained in ignorance. She must either be much more beautiful than she had hitherto considered herself, or there was a nameless something about her which fascinated and attracted the male sex.

"Were it not so," she argued, "Lord Shorncliffe would not have noticed me. A young man in his position, and as good-looking as he is, must have thousands of admirers, and would of course be able

to choose one of the most lovely and accomplished of the aristocratic ladies amongst whom he mixes; there must, then, be some charm about me, or he would not have written me that note. He wants me to meet him in the Burlington; I wonder where the Burlington is, and what it is? Is it a bazaar or a hotel? I can't imagine. I must ask somebody; certainly not Mrs. Tomlinson. But I must get leave to go out this afternoon, and if I cannot get it, why I shall take it, whatever the consequences may be. I must meet him. I have taken quite a fancy to him, and it is clear he has done the same as far as I am concerned. Fancy his being a lord, too! Mrs. Tomlinson says that his mother is very rich, and spends more money in her shop than any other customer she has. Well, I should like him if he were not a lord. Lady Shorncliffe! how pretty it sounds—Lady Shorncliffe," and Bell repeated the name over and over again.

What strange, romantic ideas was she entertaining, and allowing to overwhelm her common sense! The imagination of young girls is very vivid, and Bell was from the country. She had had some experience in the ways of men, but she was still very simple.

Four o'clock came, and Bell went timidly up to Mrs. Tomlinson, and asked permission to go out for a little while.

"Go out!" exclaimed her employer.

"Yes, ma'am," said Bell, looking down.

"Where to?"

"For a walk."

"This isn't the time for walking; it is the busiest part of the day, and I shall be sure to want you a dozen times."

"I don't often ask to go out. I am always indoors, and working for you in some way or other."

"Very well, suppose you are; what then?"

"Nothing. But I think you might let me go out when I want to particularly."

"You always work for me, do you?" continued Mrs. Tomlinson, adhering to her original proposition. When she found a mine of something to scold about, she seldom left it until it was exhausted and worked out.

"Well, you know I do."

"Don't answer me," cried Mrs. Tomlinson, angrily. "If you do work for me, haven't I a right to expect you to do so? Who took you in, when no one else would so much as look at you?—when you must have gone to the workhouse if it had not been for me!"

"There are lots of things to be done besides going to workhouses," answered Bell, boldly, who did not like to be taunted about the desolate condition she was in when she fell fainting upon the doorstep of the *Magasin*.

"Lots of things!" repeated Mrs. Tomlinson, slowly and sarcastically, "are there?"

Then she looked at Bell as if she were an ogress, and quite prepared to devour her, after having transfixed her with her glance.

Bell made no answer, she almost regretted having spoken so independently.

"I daresay you would like to do as some of those *things* do, wouldn't you?"

Bell looked up, but Mrs. Tomlinson's expression was so scaring, that she soon lowered her eyes again.

"It is such women as you that are a disgrace to the sex," said Mrs. Tomlinson, severely. "Such lazy, conceited sluts and hussies as you, who will not work, and who prefer a life of disgraceful ease, and what they call luxury, who make men think less of women than they otherwise would do. For my part, I wonder they are not killed with shame. I am sure I am half choked only to think of it."

Bell fired up at this.

"I may be unfortunate, Mrs. Tomlinson, but I have never, never done anything disgraceful; never in my life, and you know it."

"I know it! I know little or nothing about you."

"Well, if I am what you describe me, I wonder so particular a person as yourself has me in the house."

"Don't argue with me, you aggravating thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Tomlinson; "or I'll tell you what'll very quickly happen to you."

"What is that?"

"Why this: I shall bundle you out of the house neck and crop, if I have any more of your impertinence."

"I haven't been impertinent."

"Dont answer me, I tell you. I wont have it."

Bell was silent, though much against her inclination.

"Now, sit down, and go on with that bit of work I gave you to do, and don't let me hear anything more about wanting to go out walking at four o'clock in the afternoon."

Bell did not move. She was in an unpleasant position; she had determined to go out, and she did not know what to do or to say. She was half afraid of carrying on the controversy with Mrs. Tomlinson, and she would have sat down, taking the first opportunity of making her escape quietly, but the time was gliding on. It was considerably past four, and at five o'clock Lord Shorncliffe had asked her to meet him.

"Well, why don't you go?" cried Mrs. Tomlinson. "Can't you hear when you're spoken to? I declare you are more trouble than enough. You are as stubborn as a donkey. If you think to move me by standing there you are very much mistaken; I will not have any going out to-day, so if you were to talk for an hour I should not change my mind. Now, sit down, and go on with your work."

"I will when I come back," said Bell; "but I must go out now. I really must indeed."

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Tomlinson, open-mouthed with astonishment. Mutiny and rebellion were not things she had expected from Bell, who had hitherto been very docile and obedient.

"I am sure I am always ready and willing to work and do anything for you, but I must go out this afternoon. Let me have my way this time; it is only once in a way. I do not wish to annoy you. I should be very sorry to do anything of the

kind; because I remember how well and kindly you behaved to me when I first came to London."

"This is the return I get for my charity."

"It is not charity," cried Bell, indignantly. "I work for what I get, and that is not much—only my board and lodging. And as to what you were talking about just now, Mrs. Tomlinson, it is such women as you who drive poor girls to do what you so much condemn. Religion and virtue are both very well in their way, but slavery attached to them is another thing."

Mrs. Tomlinson made no response to this impassioned reply of Bell's. The young girl was wounded in her tenderest part, and she could not have resisted the inclination to speak if she had been positive that Mrs. Tomlinson would have killed her on the spot for her audacity.

"Go, young woman, go! Follow your own evil promptings," said Mrs. Tomlinson.

Bell was just about to say, Thank you, when what followed showed her very plainly that Mrs. Tomlinson was not a woman to be trifled with.

But she added—

"Never set your foot inside my house again."

"I will, I will, I *must* go!" said Bell to herself hurriedly. "I cannot help it. Some strange fascination is leading me on. I must go, whatever the consequences may be."

She walked towards the end of the shop, and put on her bonnet and shawl. She had brought them down after dinner that day, and placed them there in order to have them in readiness when she wanted

them. Bell had an old black silk dress on, which Mrs. Tomlinson had given her. It was a little shabby here and there, and not quite so full in the skirt as it had once been when it was new. The fact was Bell had torn it one day, by catching it in a rusty nail. This had made a slit of such a size that mending it was out of the question, so she unripped the seam on either side and took out the length, which made it look better, although not so large.

"Leave my dress," cried Mrs. Tomlinson, as Bell passed her in the shop.

"You gave it me," replied Bell, firmly; "and I think I have a right to it. I have worked hard for you for some time, and you have never given me a halfpenny."

"Did I agree to?"

"No, you did not. I admit that; but still you gave me this dress, and I think I have earned it. It is not much of a thing, but such as it is I mean to keep it. Good morning, Mrs. Tomlinson."

Mrs. Tomlinson turned round contemptuously, finding how resolute Bell was, and taking no more notice of her than if she had been so much dirt, swept upstairs into her show-rooms. As for Bell, she went down Regent-street with her head in a whirl, with only one idea before her, like a pole-star, and that was, "Where is the Burlington?"

CHAPTER XIX.

GOOD-BYE, LITTLE WOMAN.

When Bell was halfway down the Quadrant she ventured to ask an old lady if she knew where the Burlington was. The old lady replied snappishly that she did not, and walked on. Then she accosted a middle-aged man, who answered that he believed it was somewhere in Piccadilly. That was not lucid enough, so she asked a man, about thirty, well-dressed and good-looking, who told her it was just past the Albany. Not knowing where the Albany was, Bell was as much adrift as ever, so she inquired of a fine-looking, grey-headed old man, who carried a Malacca cane with a curiously carved top to it, who said that it was not above a stone's throw from White's. "Know White's?" he added. "Oh, you don't? Mons'ous odd! People not knowing White's? Where have you lived all your life, girl? Know Boodle's? Not know Boodle's? H'm! Well, get to the top of St. James's-street, and you wont be far off;" and away he trotted—a hobbling commentator on the text—"Not know White's or Boodle's? Mons'ous odd! Not know Boodle's?" The next Bell asked had the look of a literary man, a little preoccupied. His air nervous, his locks long and unkempt, his hands white, but the middle

finger of the right hand slightly stained with ink, and unprotected by a glove, although he carried a pair of black kid gloves in his left hand. By the look of them they might have performed the same duty for upwards of a twelvemonth; at all events, there was an air of antiquity and long-suffering about them.

"Burlington!" he exclaimed, as she addressed him. "Let me see." He appeared as if he were coming down to earth again after a rather long flight in the regions of air. At last a proper appreciation of sublunary affairs having been forced upon him, he said—"Oh, I know. Burlington Arcade, you mean; close by Potter's cellar, my dear, where the Emperor of the French, when he was an exile, used to come and buy his evening papers to see what was going on in Europe;" and he added to himself, "Mem. Potter's cellar and Louis Napoleon for next week's 'Facts and Fancies;'" and raising his head up in the air, he walked on again, looking more sublimated than ever.

After this Bell, rather frightened and abashed at her many unsuccessful attempts to find out the whereabouts of a locality everybody seemed to know, but no one could indicate plainly, addressed a young gentleman who was strolling leisurely along, smoking a cigar, and lightly holding a hazel stick in his hand.

"Look here," he replied, stopping to direct her; "run across the street, get into Vigo-street, and go straight on; you can't go wrong. Vigo-street's just opposite where you now are. You'll see a

heavy swell with a big stick; he's the beadle, and don't allow smoking."

With this he went on without waiting to receive Bell's thanks. Bell walked across the street, and soon reached the Burlington Arcade. She saw the beadle, and asked him if it was the Burlington. He replied gruffly in the affirmative, and she entered the passage with a throbbing heart and sick with expectation as to what would be the consequence of her rash step. She was completely thrown on her own resources once more. Mrs. Tomlinson had dismissed her, and Bell was sufficiently well acquainted with that worthy lady's character to know that all hopes of forgiveness in that quarter were vain and futile. A terrible suspicion forced itself into Bell's mind. What would happen to her if Lord Shorncliffe should not keep his appointment? Perhaps he had only been joking with her. Had she not been too precipitate in leaving Mrs. Tomlinson in the way she had done? Poor Bell! Dangers and difficulties were rising up on every side of her; and she at last came to the conclusion that she had launched her frail bark on the ocean of chance, and must trust to a favourable wind to blow her safely into port. She walked entirely to the end of the Arcade without see anything of Lord Shorncliffe, although she stared almost rudely at every man she met. She had only seen him once, but every lineament of his handsome face was indelibly impressed upon her mind's eye. She would have known him and singled him out amongst ten thousand. As she reached the Piccadilly end

the clock of St. James's Church struck the hour of five, and she turned round to retrace her steps, in the hope of meeting his lordship, for whom she had already sacrificed her home and her prospects; and with what object? That was a question, the answer to which was only to be found in the innermost recesses of her soul; and perhaps even there you would not have found the answer recorded.

Bell had nearly reached the other end of the Arcade without seeing anything of Lord Shorncliffe, when she heard a voice on the left-hand side of her. She knew it immediately, and looking into a small Berlin-wool shop, she saw his lordship, who was saying to a friend—

"Got an appointment here at five. Struck five, has it? Jove! didn't know. Perhaps the young party will be getting impatient. Quite out of my usual line. *Demoiselle de Comptoir*. Pretty girl, though, and rather took my fancy."

As he moved to leave the shop he caught sight of Bell, who instantly turned her head away that he might not see she was looking at him.

"Back d'rectly," he said to his friend, and walked out. He just raised his hat as he neared her, and shaking her hand, said—

"Very good of you to come, I'm sure. Hope you haven't been walking up and down this place long?"

"No," replied Bell.

"Very dull this time of year," he continued. "No one here in summer. Jolly place in winter for an hour before dinner. Something like sherry

and bitters Burlington is; gives a fellow an appetite."

Bell smiled.

Bell had overheard the few remarks of Lord Shorncliffe, for she was standing close to the shop, and they had been made in an audible tone. She did not exactly like them, but she was a little in the dark as to their meaning. The French puzzled her completely, but the words, "Quite out of my usual line," still rang in her ears, and she did not know how to take them. With the usual self-indulgence of women, she thought they were intended in a flattering sense, but she determined that she would find out.

"I am sorry to take you away from your friend," she said.

"Oh! he's nobody," replied Shorncliffe.

"Quite out of your usual line, I suppose?" she said.

"Ha! got me there. Mustn't talk so loud next time."

Bell couldn't help laughing, the expression of his face was so funny as he said this.

"Fact is, he's a fellow—Norman, Phill Norman's the man's name—fellow I don't care about knowing much. Knew him at Eton, and he hangs about one on the strength of it. Met him just now in there. Couldn't get rid of him. Deuced glad you came up at the time. Wanted me to ask him to dine. Saw through the beggar's game d'rectly. Dine him! good joke that would be. Give him some soda and brandy, if he wants it. All he's good for."

"Isn't he a gentleman, then?" asked Bell, falling into the conversational humour of her companion.

"Oh! yes, man's a gentleman as far as that goes, but he's up at Oxford, and for my part I don't like University men. Think them the greatest cads going."

"What are you, then?" asked Bell, mischievously.

"Don't know that I'm anybody in particular, certainly not the Emperor of France. Cut above him; happen to be in the Guards."

"The Horse Guards. Those with the black horses, and the armour and helmets and plume, and all that?" asked Bell.

"Well, I should rather hope not; haven't come to that yet," replied his lordship, with the least possible amount of contempt in his voice. "Suppose you got my name from the old party in the shop where my mother bought that grebe thing; that was where I met you, wasn't it? Gave you my name, I suppose, and that's why you've come to meet me."

Bell felt very hurt at this, why she did not know. Perhaps at being accused of mercenary motives, when she had really behaved in a very disinterested manner, and had given up a good deal to meet him.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew all," she replied, sadly.

"Well, little woman, let's have it. Tell us all about it. Pitch us your pitiful story," said Lord Shorncliffe.

"Perhaps I have done very wrong in coming to meet you," said Bell, "but I acted on an impulse I could not restrain."

"Love at first sight, eh?" he exclaimed.

Bell blushed, but went on without making any remark.

"I asked leave to come out, and Mrs. Tomlinson——"

"Old party in shop?" he asked, interrupting her a second time.

"Yes," she replied, "and Mrs. Tomlinson would not let me go. I would come, and she has dismissed me. So you see I have no home now and no employment; I have done something for the sake of meeting you."

Bell raised her eyes to his as she finished speaking, and there were tears in them.

Lord Shorncliffe murmured something in French, which, being translated, meant—"When a woman conceives a grand passion for a man God help him!"

"So you've lost your heart, eh, little woman?" he said, looking at her good-humouredly—for young as he was his knowledge of the world was ten times as great and as profound as hers.

Bell looked down upon the ground, as was her usual custom when she did not know what to say.

"Well, don't look so spoony; come and have something to drink."

"I will if you want something, but really, for myself, I don't care about it."

"Never mind, come along. Let's go to the Blue Posts."

Bell made no resistance, and he held out his arm. Hardly knowing what she did, she put her hand upon it, and they walked down Cork-street.

"Come upstairs," said his lordship. "Let's have a room; one can't talk downstairs in the passage, or the bar. Besides, there's a barmaid who objects to smoking, and we always have a row over it."

So they had a room, and his lordship ordered some Moselle, and told them to bring up something to eat. Whatever they had, he did not care what, as long as they didn't keep him waiting. A decent little dinner soon made its appearance, and Lord Shorncliffe made Bell sit down and have some.

"You can eat something," he said; "so sit down."

After dinner he lighted a cigar, and told the waiter to bring up a bottle of claret—best Lafitte. When it came he gave Bell some, who made faces over it.

"Can't drink it, eh? Ah! not used to it. A fellow once said a man must be a snob who couldn't eat fresh figs and olives, and drink claret. Sometimes think I'm a snob, for I can't eat figs."

Bell laughed, as she always did when his lordship was jocular; she thought him so clever and so nice.

His lordship smoked in silence for a little time, then he looked up, and suddenly exclaimed—

"I say, what's to be done with you? Lost your place, didn't you tell me?"

Bell replied "Yes," in a melancholy voice.

"Thrown on my hands," he said, in a low tone. "Confounded awkward! Don't dislike her, though. Tell you what, little woman, I'll take you to a place where you can put up."

Bell looked up dubiously.

"If you will lend me a little money," she said, "I can get a lodging, and perhaps I shall soon get some more work to do."

"Money. Oh! yes, much as you like, if that's all. Here's a fiver," he added, taking a five-pound note out of his pocket, and here's my address—'Guards' Club, Pall-mall.' Lord Shorncliffe, you know. You get settled somewhere, and drop me a line, will you?"

Bell took the money and put it in her pocket.

Soon afterwards his lordship rang the bell and paid his bill. Then he walked as far as the Albany with Bell, and pressing her hand, wished her good-bye.

And she, filled with strange emotions and thoughts, walked away, to find a home. As she went the last words of Lord Shorncliffe were ringing in her ears—

"Good-bye, little woman. Hope we shall know one another better. Going to dine at Marlborough-house to-night. Think of you, though. Bye, little woman. Bye."

CHAPTER XX.

BARELY SIX WEEKS.

BARELY six weeks had elapsed after that interview in the Burlington Arcade; but great changes had taken place in Bell Wilson's life. She loved, and was beloved in return. It was her first love; and a grand, deep, passionate love it was—all-devouring all-consuming, all-sacrificing. It was like a fiery furnace, its flame burned brightly, and it demanded a holocaust. Honour was thrown into it, and the greedy flames wound round it until it was consumed. Virtue followed quickly after, and the red heat of the furnace soon made it a thing of the past. All love of self was merged in a greater, a grander feeling. Bell worshipped, idolized, adored Lord Shorncliffe in a wild and reckless manner—so wild and so reckless—in a manner in which a woman should never allow herself to love any man, be he peer or be he commoner.

Lord Shorncliffe in a certain way reciprocated this frantic attachment. He could not see it, he could not daily witness it without being moved by it; and he began to love the woman he had at first made a plaything of. He was a good deal in her society, and would have spent a great deal of money over her, but this she would not allow—this she would not hear of.

"I only want *you*, dear, dear Arthur," she said. "I care for no one but you, and when you are with me, I am too happy to live. I never have once regretted all I have given up for you. Do not think I am reproaching you, my own. I never feel the least bit sorry; because I love you—I could not live without you; were anything to happen to you, I should soon follow you. I never dreamt how great was the power of love until lately. Oh! darling Arthur, I cannot tell how I love you. I would do anything for you. What can I do to show my love? Tell me something; only let it be very difficult, and I will do it, or die in the attempt. You are my world, my life—my very existence is bound up and centred in you. It is such happiness to me to look at your dear, dear face; I do love it so. But—what did I tell you yesterday, sir? That moustache never will curl properly and prettily unless I curl it. Run into the next room and get me the *Pomade Hongroise.* No, never mind; you are comfortable, you are smoking, as usual. Let me go. There, I have it; now let me see what I can do with that little bit of silk. It is just like silk. What made you have such a pretty moustache, Arthur? Now it looks jolly! I must kiss it. Yes, I must; it is no use resisting, because I will. And you cannot drive me away with tobacco-smoke, because I begin to like it. I smoked one of those cigarettes this morning—those you brought me last night. Look what I'm doing for you—a pair of slippers! Well, I know it's only a pair of slippers, you needn't talk

like that, and look so fierce; I'm not afraid of you. But they are such funny slippers. I bought them yesterday. Look at the pattern. Don't you see two devils are fighting over a bottle of wine in the first, and in the second one of them has it in his hand, and the other devil is running after him? Isn't it funny? I knew you would like it, dear; I said to myself directly I saw it, this is just the thing for Arthur. He is so fond of anything that isn't common."

"You're a dear good pet," he would reply.

"Call me your mouse, Arthur," she said one day.

"My mouse!—what for?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly. A mouse is a pretty thing with a nice sleek coat, you know, and it is generally shut up in a trap; and you have me here all to yourself, and so I sometimes think, when you are not with me, that I am like a mouse. Call me mouse, will you? I want to hear how it sounds."

He called her his mouse, and then she would go into a corner and pretend to be a mouse, and make him call louder; and, at last, she would come to him and pull his moustache till he growled, and then she said he was a cat, and that was purring, and when he growled very loud, she said—

"Oh! naughty tats. Mustn't do that. Poor mouse is afraid of being eaten up. She is only pulling tats's whiskers. He is a very fine tabby-cat, and has beautiful whiskers. There, puss, that's a good tats; now he shall have a kiss."

Lord Shorncliffe insisted upon her having a

brougham, but she did not care a bit about it. However it came; and she went out in it now and then, more for her health than anything else. But she pulled the window up, and leaned back in the carriage, as if she did not care about courting notice. Sometimes he would take her out shopping, and then he would spend large sums upon dresses; for he had exquisite taste, and could dress her much better than she could dress herself. When she went out walking, she would always wear a thick Maltese veil; because she said—

"She was Arthur's, and she did not like anybody else to look at her."

He would call her a little fool, but they never quarrelled about anything. If he expressed a wish that she should do anything more than once, she invariably complied with his request without a murmur. Bell was so happy with her beautiful idol, that a thought even of Tom Thorburn never came into her head. She forgot everything. Everything in the world she sacrificed and gave up for the man she loved, and, in return, she was perfectly happy; that is, up to the present time. She had never dreamed of such happiness as she experienced; for she lived entirely in Lord Shorncliffe's presence, and affection for herself.

"Oh! darling, darling Arthur," she said to him, "I cannot tell you how I love you. I am never tired of telling you of it. I am so, *so* happy with you."

It was strange that all this never tired Lord Shorncliffe; it would have sickened most men in

time; but he liked it. It was equally strange that Bell never contemplated the possibility of his leaving her. Most women would have perpetually attacked him with—

"You will never leave me, will you, dearest?"

But Bell knew her own love to be so thoroughly unselfish, that she never suspected his for an instant.

At last, the shadow fell upon her, as it always does fall upon people who make themselves idols, and are presumptuous enough to be too happy.

Lady Shorncliffe went to Eastbourne, and his lordship ran down for a day or two; but while he was there, he caught a malignant fever, which was at the time beginning to make its appearance at the fashionable watering-place. On the second day, what he had considered a slight indisposition compelled him to keep his bed; on the third, he was alarmingly ill, and Dr. Fosbrooke was sent for from London; and, besides the local physician, the great London medical luminary was in constant attendance upon him. On the fourth day, Lord Shorncliffe was delirious, and he constantly called for Bell's presence. After a time, the delirium went away, but he was very weak and ill; he was just strong enough to say "Send for Bell," and on Dr. Fosbrooke's asking him his meaning, in a low, feeble voice he told him.

The doctor went to her ladyship, who said—

"I have heard of the young person, but she shall never come inside my house—never, never, Doctor Fosbrooke."

The doctor went away, and returned to his patient.

"Have you sent? if not, telegraph," moaned his lordship.

The doctor made an evasive answer, and went back to Lady Shorncliffe.

"If your ladyship persists in your determination," he said, "not to send for this Bell Wilson, I will not answer for your son's life."

"Do you know what you ask me to do, doctor?" she demanded, indignantly.

He made no answer.

"She is a low wretch, whose touch is contamination. The bedside of my poor boy is my place, doctor; no degraded, fallen member of her sex shall ever usurp my duties."

"I can only say, madam," replied the doctor, calmly, "that if Bell Wilson, or whatever she may be called, is not here, in your son's room, before six o'clock this evening, I will not ensure his life until the morning."

And with a stately bow he left the room.

"Before six o'clock!" repeated her ladyship, with the same proud, inexorable look—"before six, and it is now twelve."

She paced uneasily up and down the apartment, for Dr. Fosbrooke was the most eminent physician in London, and Arthur Lord Shorncliffe was her only son.

CHAPTER XXI.

A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH.

BEFORE six o'clock! There was not much time for consideration. Whatever objection Lady Shorncliffe might have to fallen women, she would see her son die, if she did not put her pride in her pocket and bend her head very low, before the inexorable force of the waves of the sea of fate, which were sweeping over her frail bark, and making a clean breach of it. Ill-natured people might have said that Lady Shorncliffe's strong objection to women whose morals were easy and pliable, moulded more to suit the hour than the declining years of life, arose from the fact of one of the Countesses of Shorncliffe having, before she was raised to the peerage, been upon the stage. It was reported, and generally credited, that this lady was as accommodating as most actresses, and although she was angelically beautiful, they said she pursued Cupid with the ardour of a moth when enamoured of the flame of a candle, even at the risk of singeing her wings. People who have a hole in their coat are very often as severe upon others as the Pharisee was on the publican. However that might be, and whatever scandal there might be attaching to the family fifty or a hundred years ago, the present Lady Shorncliffe was a world of propriety—none

ever thought of asserting the contrary. She had been a lady in waiting upon her majesty, and was still in the best odour at court, where her diamonds and her ostrich feathers were frequently to be seen on great and grand occasions. She had danced in the quadrille of the season at the Caledonian Ball, and she was still celebrated for giving the best parties in Eaton-square, where she resided when she was in town. All her hopes and aspirations were centred in her son. If Arthur turned out ill, what had she to live for? Her ideas of propriety were very strict, and when she became aware of the imprudent and immoral connexion that he had formed, she held up her hands in a sort of pious horror. Her reasoning shaped itself into something like this:—

"If the foolish boy is so fond of women, why does he not marry some nice well-bred girl with a good fortune? I could put my finger this moment on half-a-dozen who would jump at him. A boy like Arthur, young, handsome, rich, with a title, is a very big fish in the matrimonial net, and the sort of thing you don't meet with every day, or pick up in the street. However he can find anything to interest him in a woman of the town—for I am persuaded the creature he calls Bell can be nothing better—I am sure I cannot guess. He has not been accustomed to low society, he never had low ideas, and I am altogether at a loss to account for his fatuity. I can understand a young man having a taste for women's society, it is only natural at his age that he should have, but a *liaison* with a lowborn

woman I cannot and will not tolerate. I suppose she has the usual sort of face that those women have. There are only two sorts; she must have one or the other. If she was born in a town, she is thin and pale, and probably dark; if she comes from the country, she is red and fair, with a snub nose, and a face like a full moon."

Lady Shorncliffe was in a great strait. One of the most eminent physicians in London, where the science of medicine is supposed to be studied under peculiar advantages and brought to great perfection, had told her that her dearly-loved son was fretting for a person whom he called Bell; that if this girl did not make her appearance by a certain time he would not be answerable for his patient's life. To say all this was to shoot dart after dart with the barbs impregnated with virulent poison into her ladyship's heart. It showed her that her child, who was not now delirious or out of his senses, was really passionately in love with a girl of no name, of no family, of no fortune. This last was the most trivial consideration; the others were all-important. Should she sacrifice her son to her pride? Should she allow her only child to fall a victim to her haughty spirit? The thought maddened her. But if she consented—if she submitted to the request of Arthur and the dictates of the doctor, and telegraphed for Bell Wilson to come down to Eastbourne by the express train, she would be compelled to humble and humiliate herself before a woman whom she not only despised but positively hated. Either she must do this, or if there was

any trust to be placed in the dispenser of prescriptions and of physic, she must see Arthur Lord Shorncliffe die before her eyes. By putting out her hand she could save him—by holding it back she signed his death-warrant. This was how the case stood. Her ladyship was still irresolute, when a knock came at the door of the boudoir in which she was sitting. A feeble "Come in" gave admittance to Dr. Fosbrooke. He bowed in a slightly frigid manner, she thought. The fact was, the doctor was not a little disgusted with Lady Shorncliffe's squeamishness. Doctors are men of the world, and they cannot make allowance for scruples such as those which animated the proud old lady upon whose privacy he had just intruded. He knew that Lord Shorncliffe was in a very precarious state. He was weak and prostrated, and he longed with a childish eagerness for the presence of a woman to whom he was devotedly attached. His experience told him that when men are sick and at death's door, whose hinges are only too well oiled, their hearts become softened, and they are in a great measure like children; if they set their hearts on anything, and they are disappointed, it may administer a shock to their system, already too much shattered, which is only too likely to be fatal. It was this consideration, which a long and extensive practice had confirmed, which animated Doctor Fosbrooke when he urged her ladyship to send for Bell Wilson.

The doctor, in his blunt way, at once plunged into the business which had brought him a second time to the mother of his patient.

"Has your ladyship decided?" he asked, abruptly.

"You see, doctor, I am reluctant," she began, in a tone which showed that she was trying to compromise with her conscience.

"Pardon me," he cried. "This is no time for hesitation or reluctance; will you let the girl come, or will you not?"

This was sufficiently point-blank, and her ladyship could not see any way of escaping a direct answer to so direct a question. Still she vacillated. The conflict between pride and maternal love was very fierce indeed.

"My dear Dr. Fosbrooke," she said, blandly, "pray be seated. Do not excite yourself, I beg. If I were to send for this girl, who can tell the consequences that might arise from it? A serious passion on his part might be called into existence. He might be penetrated with a foolish sense of mistaken gratitude; that is, if she succeeded in bringing him round, which you say is not at all unlikely. No doubt she is a designing creature, as most bad and unprincipled women are, and it might all end in marriage."

"My dear madam," said the doctor, who had listened patiently to this speech, "what you say is not without reason. You must be prepared to run all those risks; but you must allow me to put one question to you. It is a solemn and a serious one, and I trust you will answer it truly."

"And that is, doctor?" she said, quietly.

"That is, Lady Shorncliffe," he returned, "which would be most agreeable to you: to see your son

the husband of Bell Wilson, or to see him lying a corpse in a coffin? I hope I have said nothing to offend you. I am a blunt man; and when I have anything on my mind I never rest easy until I have it out."

Lady Shorncliffe grew red in the face as an angry flush passed over it. At last she replied, as she clenched her hands tightly together—

"I would rather see my son dead than married to a woman who has forgotten what she owes to God, to her sex, and to society. What," she continued, with a firm emphasis—"what would be the difference to me were he to do such a thing? To me he would be virtually dead. In my eyes his sin would be an unpardonable one. Never again should he cross the threshold of my house. I would never, never forgive him! So I say it would be better for him to die than to do such a thing."

Her face grew pale as she proceeded, the flush faded away, and she was white as snow; her lips became bloodless, and she was evidently the prey of violent emotion.

Dr. Fosbrooke shrugged his shoulders, took up his hat, and said—

"In that case, Lady Shorncliffe, I can be of no further use to him. I shall return to London at once, and you must pardon me for saying that I regret you should sacrifice your son to your prejudice. I can do no more for him, so I wish you good morning."

Without any further notice of her ladyship, he left the room. His brows were bent, and there was

a look of displeasure upon his face. He could not understand the obstinacy, the heartlessness, and the cruelty that the old lady had exhibited. In his opinion it was not natural.

"I never met with such a case in the whole course of my experience," he said, as he went towards the railway station. "It is little short of murder. 'Pon my word, I don't think I shall be doing right if I do not act independently, and send the girl down. I have her address in my pocket. I must think it over."

Dr. Fosbrooke did not believe in the efficacy of noble blood. He was a man of the people himself, although not what is termed a man of the pavement. His parents were good old commoners, but they had never been allied to the peerage. He thought that if noble blood was sullied occasionally by the introduction of the common element, it would give a fillip to the declining breed, and prevent it from utterly degenerating and going into a lunatic asylum, or the place at Earlswood, were those of weak intellect are carefully tended. The doctor believed in the nobility of the head and heart, and founded his creed upon it and placed his trust in it. The success brought about by talent and sheer hard work was more to him than a thousand quarterings. And so, while he felt angry with Lady Shorncliffe, he pitied her. When he arrived at the railway station, he exclaimed, half aloud—

"I'll do it—by George I'll do it!"

Giving his portmanteau in charge of the porter, and telling him to label it for London, he went to

the telegraph office, and intimated to the clerk that he wished to send a message. Now telegraph clerks are, I have usually found, the most unconcerned, independent, and lazy men that could possibly be found to fill an important situation, which is a great argument for the adoption of women in their places. Ticket-clerks at railway stations are bad enough, but those of whom I am speaking are many shades and degrees worse. But there was something so determined about the doctor's manner, that the careless dependent of a company, which has for its motto—*nec nos mare separat ingens*, did not dare to keep him waiting more than half a minute. Such celerity in attendance had never before been known at Eastbourne, and was marvelled at much by the porters accordingly. To Bell Wilson the doctor telegraphed to come down by the first fast train.

"There," he said, when he had finished his message, "if she gets that directly it arrives she will be down in time. If not, that poor young fellow will pine himself to death, which will be a pity, for he is a likely boy enough for a peer of the realm," he added, as if he did not like to praise the peerage too much, even when the praise was well merited and deserved. "Well," he continued, "if anything should happen it will not be my fault; I shall have nothing to reproach myself with. I have done my duty, and I wash my hands of the whole affair."

In the meantime Lord Shorncliffe was tossing restlessly and uneasily upon his bed. He was as weak as a mouse. Had he got out of bed he could

not have stood upright for half a minute. The clever London physician had saved his life, and that was all. He longed intensely for Bell. His whole mind was centred upon her, and he would have given worlds to have seen her by his bedside. After Dr. Fosbrooke had taken his departure the young man's mother paid him a visit. She had forced herself to assume a cheerfulness she was far from feeling in reality. There was a cheery smile upon her lips, but it would have deceived no one but an invalid. A pang shot across the mother's heart as she looked at her wan and emaciated boy, he was so greatly altered. His brief but severe illness had pulled him down more in one week than she would have believed possible had she not seen it. His eyes were the only pleasant things about him to look at; they sparkled with an eager hope, an anxious expectation, a firm belief that he should see Bell before the day waned. The doctor had promised him he should. Doctors always promise their patients everything they wish for; they treat them as people treat children. But Arthur did not think of that. As the time went on he grew feverishly impatient. He kept on saying to himself that he could not wait, he should go out of his mind if she did not come. And yet he knew all the time that he should have to wait; but this childish impatience was part and parcel of his disease. When his mother came to see him he felt her presence as a relief. He was thinking of Bell as she entered the room, wondering whether she would think him much altered—wondering what she

would say, and expecting that she would scold him prettily for not sending to her before.

Lady Shorncliffe took a chair and sat down by her son's bedside, and took one of his poor wasted hands in hers.

"The doctor says you are much better to-day," she exclaimed. "He thinks you are out of danger altogether; and, in fact, he has gone back to town, because he finds that his presence here is no longer of any use."

Arthur smiled, she thought, at the clever perversion of the truth she had invented for his edification; but she was mistaken, as clever women are often apt to be. He was thinking of Bell, and reflecting, as well as his giddy mind would let him, that a few more minutes had elapsed, and the time when his heart's treasure would be before him was a little nearer.

Lady Shorncliffe said a few more unmeaning things, which he heard, but which possessed no especial interest for him. His mind was full of one idea, and it had no room for the intrusion of another. Suddenly it occurred to him to speak to his mother. Turning his head round upon the pillow, and fixing his eyes upon her, he said—

"Did the doctor tell you what I asked him to do?"

Her ladyship turned cold and frigid, and drew in her horns immediately, keeping her senses on the alert to repel this unexpected attack.

"Yes," she replied; "he mentioned something to me."

"And you made no objection? You are very good, very kind," he said, with enthusiasm.

"No; not a word. There, don't excite yourself; you will be well in a day or two. I will send you some grapes presently."

Shaking his hand she left the room. With characteristic delicacy neither mother nor son had mentioned Bell's name. But she occupied the thoughts of both. One cursed her, the other blessed her.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MEETING.

Lord Shorncliffe became very low, and fidgety, and nervous during the afternoon. He was fretful and irritable with every one who came near him. His old nurse came in for her share of his ill-temper. If she ventured to speak to him he snapped her up in such a way that she said to herself—

"He ain't got no call to bite a body's nose off!"

He could not sleep, and he felt especially annoyed at the street cries and noises. Had he been a despot he would have ordered some of the peripatetic vendors of fish and vegetables to be instantly executed; but as he was far from being autocratic, he was obliged to content himself with groaning a feeble protest against the idiotic impotence of the municipal council. Some children with penny trumpets especially annoyed him, and he wondered who the wretch was who invented the abomination which seemed to delight the minds of children of tender years—whoever he was he devoted his memory to execration. If he were still existent in the flesh he thought that breaking upon the wheel, elongation upon the rack, compression in the arms of the Scavenger's Daughter were all too good for him. Nothing but utter annihilation in an Irish row at all came up to the standard of revenge that

he set up for the barbarous originator of so excruciating an instrument of torture. The noise of the penny trumpets was shrill and penetrating, like the wailing of a tom-cat in its death agony. No amount of feline moll-rowing could possibly surpass it; but all nuisances must come to an end some day. Even your country neighbour, who will keep pigs on a large scale, and refuses to litter them above once in six months, cannot live for ever; and so the penny trumpets moved on, and gave place to a German band, which was little better than its predecessors, but that, after a while, was induced to go higher up the Parade; and so the afternoon passed, and six o'clock came. The invalid for the last two hours had held his watch in his hand: he looked at it contentedly. The doctor had promised him that Bell should be with him at six—not later than six. At fashionable watering-places churches and parsons are always plentiful, and the clocks of the churches put their mechanism in motion, making the bells clang out the hour. Hardly had they finished—scarcely had the last vibration departed from the air, than Lady Shorncliffe once more came to see her son. She found him with a dressing-gown thrown round his shoulders eating grapes. He seemed quite jovial.

"Well, mater!" he said, "what news?"

He usually called her mater; it was an old Eton word, and he had not forgotten it.

"I am glad to see you so much better," she replied, evading the question.

"Yes, I do feel better. The time is near, you

know. I drank a glass of portwine just before you came in. What is that? Was that a fly?"

"No, I think not."

"The express comes in at six, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. How slow those fly fellows always drive!"

Lady Shorncliffe looked sanctimoniously at the ceiling, as if she were asking the inanimate plaster to forgive her what she very well knew Heaven would not. Then she spoke in slow and measured tones—

"I am sorry you should be disappointed, Arthur, but——"

"But what?" he eagerly demanded.

"My poor boy, I am afraid you have been very much deceived."

"How—how do you mean?" he was almost gasping.

His mother looked pityingly at him.

"Tell me, tell me quick, if you don't want to—to kill me; tell me!"

His nervous agitation was painful to witness. It ought to have moved a heart of stone, possibly it might have been more efficacious with that material than it was with flesh and blood.

"Your 'friend' either cannot or will not come to you."

"It's not true," he cried; "I—I don't believe it."

While he was yet speaking, a loud knocking, followed by some energetic bell-ringing, such as the menials of the stable excel in, was heard at the front door. They both heard it. Its effect upon

both, however, was very different. The woman turned white and red, and her face finally settled down into the colour of light wine-and-water. The boy shouted as well as his strength would allow him—

"There she is! I knew it wasn't true. They told you a lie, whoever it was. I knew she'd come —I knew she'd fly to me, when she heard where I was! The poor little bird!"

Lady Shorncliffe was not so sanguine about the advent of Bell as her son.

"It cannot be her," she kept saying to herself. "Who could have told her? It cannot have been Dr. Fosbrooke, he would not dare to take such a liberty without first consulting me. Oh, no! He would not think of such a thing after the decided conversation we had together this morning."

But her ladyship was out of her reckoning. She remained in the sick-room listening for some sign. In a minute or two her quick ear detected the sound of a footstep on the stairs. Then she heard another. There were two people there—both of them women, by the sound. Who could they be? She was about to leave the room to reconnoitre, and take, what they call in France, preventive measures if necessary, when Lord Shorncliffe exclaimed—

"Stop where you are! You shall not leave the room. I wont trust you—you are her enemy."

She did not heed him. Her hand was upon the door, when it was pushed open from outside, and the servant ushered in Bell Wilson, saying—

"A young lady to see my lord, my lady."

Bell advanced a few paces into the room, and stood still. She was plainly but very becomingly dressed; she had on a black silk dress covered with a red woollen shawl, and a velvet bonnet. Her hesitation was but momentary. Altered as her Arthur was, she knew him at a glance. Running across the room, she fell down by the bedside, and taking his transparent hand in hers, rained rapturous kisses upon it, fell down on her knees and kissed him, as if her soul went along with her caresses.

Lady Shorncliffe was completely conquered—defeated—taken by storm. She could do nothing; she was helpless as a prisoner within four stone walls—as incapable of action as Monte Christo in the Chateau d'If. With a scowl of ominous presage she swept grandly from the room, and left her boy "under the upas tree," as she expressed it.

Arthur was too excited to speak, he could only bend down and kiss her again and again. When the first exuberance of their joy was over, he called her his own, his darling, his pet, and twenty more endearing epithets, and the osculatory part of the business had to be gone through again. It was Love's young dream, and it was very sweet. After awhile, he told her to sit on a chair by his bedside. She did so, still keeping his hand in hers, and pressing it fondly every now and then. They began to exchange confidences. He told her how ill he had been, and how the doctor had sent for her.

Poor Bell! hers had been a miserable existence

during his illness. She had nearly gone distracted. Her first impression was that he had met with some accident, and she searched and ransacked the papers over and over again day by day, fully expecting to find some such heading as "Melancholy accident to Lord Shorncliffe." When she did not see this after many days' diligent search, she grew terrified, and began to think he had left her; and yet she would not believe it. He would never leave her without a word, without a line—it was not like him. Tossed about in a sea of troubles, the unhappy girl had received Dr. Fosbrooke's message very much as a murderer on the scaffold receives a reprieve—with joy and gladness, but yet with reservation. The message was vague, and she was still in perplexity. When she saw him lying on the bed, she knew at once that he had been ill—dangerously ill, perhaps—and she not near him!

"Why did you not send for me before, dearest?" she asked.

"Because, *Sorcietto,* I couldn't—I was too ill. You forget I have been delirious."

"How dreadful! Was that your mother I saw when I came into the room?"

"Yes. Never mind her."

"But how she looked at me!"

"Did she? Well, she can't do you any harm."

"It is very silly of me, but I feel afraid of her."

"Afraid? Nonsense!" he replied, with a laugh.

"I do, indeed, Arthur," she said, with an involuntary shudder.

"Pour me out a glass of that wine, will you, darling," he said, by way of changing the subject.

She gave him some wine, and then they talked over what was best to be done. It was arranged that Bell should sleep at a quiet hotel close by, and come and nurse him and talk to him in the day-time; and as she left him that evening he kissed her very tenderly and very fondly, and said—

"Dear, dear, darling Bell! I shall owe my life to you."

She looked happily at him, and glided from the room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MOTHER'S LAMENT.

With the impetuosity and thoughtlessness of youth, Bell thought that her happiness was secured for ever. She was by the side of the man she loved, and she did not anticipate any untoward event which might separate them. There was, however, an evil genius at work, who was very cleverly weaving his spells. Bell was not destined to wait long before she discovered this. Of course Bell was up early in the morning the day after her arrival at Eastbourne; but she did not think it would be right or proper to call at Shorncliffe House till at least nine or ten o'clock in the day. She walked about the town; she had breakfast; then she took another walk, and at nine o'clock she could restrain her impatience no longer. She wanted to be doing something for Arthur; if she could only minister to him in some way, however slight or insignificant, she would be satisfied. She thought she might read to him, or peel an orange for him. Devotion very often shows itself and proves its existence by the most trifling acts, as well as by those of greater magnitude.

When the servant admitted her, he said—

"Will you be kind enough to step into her ladyship's room, miss?—she wishes to speak to you."

The man was civil, because he dared not be otherwise to anyone in whom Lord Shorncliffe took an interest, but there was something in his tone that Bell did not like. It was not because Lady Shorncliffe had let fall anything in his presence—she was much too well-bred and too proud to discuss her private affairs or those of her son before her domestics—but the man had drawn his own conclusions from what had come either under his own notice, or from the tittle-tattle of the servants' hall. To go through the servants' hall is indeed a fiery ordeal, and to come out unscathed next to impossible. Bell intimated her consent and her willingness to wait upon her ladyship, and was ushered into her presence forthwith. Lady Shorncliffe was alone. The remains of breakfast were upon the table, and a cup of tea was still by her ladyship's side. Motioning with her hand, she said, in a frigid, unbending tone, in which there was not one particle of suavity—

"Sit down, will you, please."

The last word was extracted from her by the courtesy inherent in her nature.

Her face was stern and cold, and the lines of her forehead more marked than usual. Bell sat down trembling—it was an inward sort of tremor more than an external shiver, and so it passed unnoticed by the lynx eyes of Lady Shorncliffe.

Bell felt that she was going to be insulted, or at least to have something extremely unpleasant said to her, but she resolved to be as civil in return as she could, because she was Arthur's mother.

"You can guess why I have sent for you," was the opening sentence of the verbal campaign about to ensue, which fell upon Bell's ears.

Bell was not a bit a woman of the world; she did not know how to fence or to prevaricate in the slightest degree, and so she played into her adversary's hands, by replying—

"Ye-es, I think I can."

"That reply does credit to your clearsightedness," said her ladyship, who added, mentally—"What a consummate little fool! Fair like a doll, too. Well, who would have thought it? What fools men are! Nicely dressed, though, and doesn't wear her things badly."

Bell blushed, and looked flustered, and as if she wished herself out of the room upstairs with Arthur.

"Perhaps you are not aware," continued Lady Shorncliffe, "that I did not do myself the honour of sending for you yesterday."

"Indeed! I was not aware of it."

"Oh dear, no; I should not have thought of such a thing for a moment. You must know that your presence in my house cannot be anything but very unpleasant to me. You cannot be ignorant of this."

Bell felt angry at this, and replied a little warmly, but still respectfully. The blood of the old Saxon yeoman was getting heated. In Bell's opinion, Lady Shorncliffe's connexion with the peerage did not place her upon so wonderful an eminence above herself.

"I do not know who sent for me," she replied; "some one must have done so, or I should not now be here. Your son was glad to see me, and I did not know but what he was in his own house. I am sorry to intrude upon anybody, and you must remember that *I* did not seek this interview, and I shall be glad to end it now, this moment."

Lady Shorncliffe looked at her with some slight astonishment. She had expected something of the sort. She had heard "that those women were always violent." But when she saw Bell, she imagined that she was too meek and mild—too full of milk-and-water, to make any demonstration. She was not sorry that she was mistaken. She had an adversary a little more worthy of her powers. There is not much pleasure or gratification in crushing a worm, you can do that by just putting your foot out; but kill a snake, and there is some excitement about the affair.

Her ladyship wore a little gold eyeglass; this she adjusted, and examined her visitor carefully through its help.

"You must excuse me," she said, when she had finished her scrutiny, "you are the first young person of the class to which you belong that I ever came in contact with, and you must, I repeat, excuse me if I do not shape what I say in a way that is agreeable to you."

"What do you mean?" cried Bell, her eyes flashing.

"Well, my meaning ought to be apparent enough."

"It is not to me," said Bell, catching her breath.

"Oh, then I will endeavour to make it more so: I do not doubt for an instant that you would be glad to end this interview, but I do not intend that you shall do anything of the sort. I wish to speak to you, and you will be good enough to listen to me, without losing your temper, I hope. Not that I am afraid of scenes—far from it. What I meant just now was simply this: there are women who, either from an innate obliquity of their moral vision, or from a depraved inclination, do things which the rest of their sex neither will nor can tolerate or forgive—you are one of those. Need I be more explicit?"

The tears started to Bell's eyes; she was about to reply, but Lady Shorncliffe interrupted.

"Pardon me—not yet—when I have done I shall be happy to hear you. However agreeable your society may be to young men, who amuse themselves with you for the moment, your presence beneath my roof is nothing more or less than an insult. We are at war—you and I—not only because of your breach of the broad principles which rule society, but because you have tried to rob me of my son."

"I *will* speak!" exclaimed Bell, unable to restrain herself any longer. "What you say may be true enough, but as Heaven hears me, I did not think of all this. Your son told me he loved me. I believed him, and if I am not his wife, per-perhaps I-I may be some day."

"Exactly," replied Lady Shorncliffe, who did not in the least lose her temper.

Hot iron is easily moulded, cold iron will bear a good deal.

"Exactly. If your morals were simply accommodating, you would not be so dangerous; but you are designing, ambitious—and you have not the tact to conceal it from me. I am a woman of some experience, and if you expect me to believe that your chastity fell before the attacks of my poor son, who it is clear is your victim, why, all I can say is, that you are more foolish than I gave you credit for."

Bell started from her chair, and cried in a quavering voice—

"I cannot! I will not! You have no right to!"

Then she sank back in her seat, and murmured—

"She is his mother."

There was something very pretty in this little act of forbearance. Because she was Arthur's mother, she might insult her with impunity.

"Have you finished your theatrical display?" asked her ladyship, blandly. "One would think you had been on the stage of the Strand Theatre. Pray, in the course of your chequered career, have you ever stood before the footlights?"

Bell made no response; she stuffed her handkerchief in her mouth to keep her tongue still.

"Ah! in the ballet, perhaps—it is very much the same thing. You came down here, I think, to see my son, who fancies that he has a *penchant* for you? He is ill now, you see, and a little *distrait;* when he is well, he will blow all his fancies to the winds. I know him better than you do. He will blow them away like one blows the fluff

from a dandelion flower in summer. He is only playing with you. He has achieved his object; and when that is done, what more do men want? Come, let us be candid with one another. Will you go back to London to-day? You shall have what money you want—a hundred, five hundred, a thousand pounds! I am liberal. Come, will you go?"

"If he—if Arthur wishes it," replied Bell, artfully.

She knew he would not.

"That is simply absurd and nonsensical. Will you go?"

"I'll tell you where I will go, Lady Shorncliffe," said Bell, in a firm voice.

"Anywhere you like — Paris, Baden, Rome, Homburg, Nice. Say Paris; all young people like Paris, and it is just the place for your sort of women. The French will go *tête montée* about you. Shall I write you a cheque?"

Bell rose from her chair, and replied—

"Good-morning, Lady Shorncliffe, I am going to see your son."

And she ran quickly out of the room. Lady Shorncliffe was completely taken aback; she had never been so thoroughly mistaken and disappointed.

"Going to see her son!" Could she have heard aright?—she very much doubted it. But when Bell left the room, she could doubt no longer. She must act immediately, or she would lose the game. She hastily followed Bell, and perceived her at the

top of the first flight of stairs. Her ladyship's maid was on the same landing.

"Stop that woman!—stop her, Parkhouse!" screamed her ladyship.

Parkhouse instantly comprehended what was required of her, and laid hold of Bell by the arm.

"Let me go! let me go!" cried Bell, in a shrill treble.

"Hold her tight!" exclaimed her ladyship, in a rich contralto.

"I've got her, my lady," replied Parkhouse, in a fine mezzo soprano.

Lord Shorncliffe's room was not far off. Aroused by the noise, and hearing Bell's voice, he grew so excited, that he could not remain still in his bed. Regardless of the consequences, without slippers, without anything but his dressing-gown, which flowed in ample folds to his heels, he rushed from the room. He was quickly by the side of Parkhouse, in whose Amazonian grasp Bell was struggling.

"Help me, Arthur! help me!" beseeched Bell.

Lord Shorncliffe stretched out his arm to do so, but the exertion proved too much for him. A sudden chill struck upon his system, and he fell pulseless to the ground.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DEATH.

When Lord Shorncliffe fell to the ground, the three women sunk their personal animosity in their general interest to minister to his lordship's wants. His mother and the servant promptly took hold of his body, and carried him upstairs again. Bell, for the time, was disregarded, although not forgotten. She followed the melancholy burden tearfully. She was alarmed, she was anxious, dreading she knew not what, but yet filled with an undefined terror of some impending and crushing catastrophe. They laid the unconscious man upon his bed, covering him over with a blanket and the counterpane. The maid was despatched for surgical assistance; and the best medical talent in Eastbourne was soon on its way to Shorncliffe House. Her ladyship walked up and down by her son's bed, occasionally stopping to observe his countenance more closely, or to take his hand in hers, and see if the pulse beat a little less feebly. Now and then she despatched a glance full of fiery and vindictive hatred in Bell's direction. Bell was too much absorbed in her own grief and apprehension to pay much attention to these evidences of animosity. She had seated herself near the foot of the bed. The countess seemed determined not to allow her

to approach nearer to the object upon which the love of both was centred. Her restless but continuous walk was perhaps undertaken to deter Bell from advancing closer than she was at present.

One by one the doctors arrived. They looked at the patient. They made little observations, which no one but themselves could understand or see the use of. Then they shook their heads and indulged in short confabulations, which they dignified by the name of consultations. After that they did what they ought to have done at first, and what any hospital surgeon in London or Manchester would have done. They endeavoured to restore the patient to consciousness. It was a task of some difficulty, for Lord Shorncliffe was utterly worn out and prostrated by his long and wearisome illness; and leaving his warm bed to encounter the chilly atmosphere of the staircase and passages, without anything like adequate covering for his body, had brought about what was almost as much to be dreaded as death itself; for it was usually the precursor of death—a relapse. The young man's soul had trembled on his lips, but it had not yet winged its flight; it returned once more to its shrine of clay to linger a little while before it went upon its long journey. But his mind was found to be wandering. He did not know any one in the room. He looked coldly upon his mother, who violently forced her anguish back into her breast, and spoke kind and gentle words to him, but he heeded her no more than he did the doctors. His stare was fixed and glaring—his features as immovable as those of a

statue. As yet he had not spoken; but all at once he opened his mouth, and said, in a sepulchral tone, "Bell." She was by his side in a moment; she had waited and watched for this. Not all the mothers in Christendom should keep her away from him now. He had called her: her fears were groundless then. He had recognised her, and addressed her by her Christian name. The doctors made room for her, and she stood close to the sick man side by side with Lady Shorncliffe, who shrank on one side as their dresses touched, as if there was pollution in the contact. Bell did not notice this. If she had done so, she would have taken no offence at such a time and place.

"You called me, Arthur; I am here," she said.

Lord Shorncliffe looked at her with his glassy stare; but there was no recognition in his gaze—none at all—not the slightest symptom. She might have been an utter stranger to him for what his eyes and face said to the contrary.

"Do you not know me, Arthur? It is I—Bell."

He paid no more attention to this appeal than he had done to the former one. Lady Shorncliffe turned away with a short, dry laugh, saying—

"If he does not know his mother, is it likely he will know her?"

One of the doctors was about to speak, when the patient's lips moved again. This time he spoke in a sing-song, chirruping voice, as if he were scanning a lot of dactyls, "Bell—Bell—Bell." Hardly had they recovered their surprise at this, than the whole expression of his face changed, and the gloom of

death pervaded his countenance. "Let the bell toll—toll—toll—toll," came slowly from him in the deepest bass; and those round the bedside shuddered as they heard it. It was singular that in the midst of all his strange incoherent talk he should preserve the name of her he loved, although all else was blank in his mind.

"Oh, this is dreadful!" sobbed Bell.

In that hour of tribulation and of sorrow she thought of the religious precepts she had learnt at home; and she reflected that Heaven might forgive her presumption in supplicating at the foot of the throne of grace for an extension of the days on earth of Lord Shorncliffe. With this idea uppermost in her mind, heedless of the presence of strangers, she fell on her knees, and was about to pour out her soul in prayer. She buried her face in her hands; but she had hardly sunk down, when a strong hand was laid upon her shoulder, and a voice, stern, harsh, and inflexible, hissed rather than whispered in her ear—

"*You* dare to pray to God for my son! Supplicate Him for yourself! *Your* prayers would only bring a curse upon his head."

It was Lady Shorncliffe's voice.

Bell reddened with shame, and a strong sense of humiliation ran through her at being spoken to in this way. What had she done that her prayers were not to be heard by Heaven? Had she committed the unpardonable sin—the sin against the Holy Ghost which can *never* be forgiven? She could not think it. For what she had done wrong

she was heartily sorry, and how bitterly she was being punished for it! She could not pray now, her mind was too disturbed; she could only inwardly breathe an aspiration that Arthur might recover from his present dangerous illness. Two of the doctors went away. Soon after Bell rose to her feet, and sat down once more, timidly, upon a chair at the foot of the bed. The third remained to speak to the nurse, and give her certain directions, and then he departed. The woman who officiated as nurse went downstairs to get something that was required in the sick-room, and the mother and the mistress were together—alone together. Bell had not been weeping. Her grief had taken another form, one not unfrequent. Her heart was very full, and she would have given worlds to have been able to cry; but the privilege was not accorded her. Her eyes were red, and dry, and bloodshot. Her face bore a strained and feverish look. Lady Shorncliffe was too proud to cry or show any emotion before Bell; but her grief was poignant enough for all that. She looked upon Bell as the cause of this new catastrophe. Had she left the house when she had been bidden to do so, Lord Shorncliffe would not have overheard the altercation which subsequently arose, and, *à fortiori*, he would not have fallen down insensible upon the stairs. This was the way in which her ladyship argued; but it never occurred to her that Bell considered she had a perfect right to go and see Lord Shorncliffe. She had lived with him very much as his wife; he had engaged her affections,

and he had been the cause of her fall. She had been sent for from London expressly because he wanted to see her; and the imperious lady ought to have asked herself the question whether it was just and reasonable to expect the girl to go back to London under such circumstances, especially as Arthur was dangerously ill, and Bell felt it to be her duty to watch by his bedside and restore him to his former state of health, which she would most probably have done had she not been injudiciously interfered with by a lady possessing more pride and self-will than good, sound, common sense. There are more ways than one of killing a dog. But so hasty was Lady Shorncliffe's nature that she could not rest until she had annihilated Bell. She looked upon her as a noxious reptile, whom it behoved society at large to utterly extirpate off the face of the earth. She had tried to extirpate her, but in the effort she had done what was nearly equivalent to killing her son. The doctors came back again in a few hours. Neither Lady Shorncliffe nor Bell had left the room. The former had continued her restless, uneasy walk up and down the room; the latter had remained watching, with unspeakable eagerness, for the least change, either for better or for worse, in Arthur. But no change had taken place; he still knew no one. If anything, he was a shade weaker and more exhausted. They forced something down his lips, but it did not seem to do him much good. One of the doctors, with much gesticulation, gave his colleagues an animated clinical lecture. This was the undoubted

head of the medical profession at Eastbourne. The clinical lecture had the effect of convincing the other two—a fact almost unparalleled in the annals of medicine, for I never heard before of one doctor being convinced by another. Lady Shorncliffe was drawn on one side, and the melancholy news that her son could not live through the night confided to her. She bore the intelligence with a strong impassibility, and no one who looked at her at that moment could have guessed at the raging volcano in her heart. She merely cast one glance, full of the most venomous hatred, in Bell's corner of the room, and she bowed her head to the medical decree, as if she were letting the storm sweep over her. But although she bowed low, the fierce blast nearly broke her proud heart. She had been educated in a school which teaches people its disciples to conceal their feelings, and hide the promptings and dictates of nature from the eyes of others. Calmness and self-possession are everything, and worth many inward pangs, if you can only acquire them at such a price. She was calm and self-possessed; but from that moment—from the instant when the doctors told her, with all the gentleness which medical men are famous for (I beg no one will think me satirical), that Arthur Lord Shorncliffe would not last out the night the sable shadows of which were gradually but swiftly enveloping the town, she looked upon Bell Wilson as the murderess of her son. It was unjust—it was altogether wrong. She had been harbouring a feeling of rancour against her for some time, and now it burst forth with all

its peculiar virulence. Her bosom was like a nest of snakes—a congeries of poisonous serpents—all twisting and writhing together, darting out their forked tongues, and hissing at Bell, in whose flesh they would have been only too happy to have imprinted their death-charged fangs. From that hour Lady Shorncliffe never spoke. She took a chair and placed it close to the head of the bed, and there took up her position. Once Bell ventured to move a little nearer Arthur, but she warded her back again, and Bell slunk back to her old place, saying meekly—

"She is his mother. While he lives I will obey her. She is more to him than I am. Heaven help her in this great trouble!"

Bell had overheard the doctors' conversation, and she gathered from it there was little or no hope. She could not at first bring herself to believe it. No hope! Why, a few weeks ago he had been in the prime of life, courted, fêted, run after. A nobleman, rich, in the Guafûs, the pet of London society, and her own heart's idol. And what was he now? The shadow of his former self; a wreck, a shattered and broken wreck. A numbed sensation stole over her, and she existed as it were for a time without a mind; she was incapable of thought. When the body receives a heavy blow it falls stunned to the earth, incapable of thought or action. She was mentally stunned, and for a long, long time she remained so. She could see objects in the room—the nurse, the lights, the doctor, the stony form of Lady Shorncliffe, and the wax-like face of

Arthur, but she could not concentrate her ideas upon any one of them; they were patent to her sense of sight, and that was all. The hours passed, and the young lord never rallied—never held up his head again. His system had been so severely shocked in the morning, at a time when he was utterly incapable of bearing anything of the kind, that his death-warrant had been sealed, and he was dying by inches. At twelve o'clock he was worse, and at about four in the morning, at the turn, as it is called, he had but the eighth of an hour more to exist in this world. The signs were unmistakable. The eyes were closed; a little piece of wool placed on the silky moustache which lined his upper lip was unmoved by his respiration.

"He is dying! my boy is dying!" exclaimed Lady Shorncliffe, in the wailing voice of the mothers who were deprived of their offspring by Herod the babe-slayer.

The sound of her ladyship's voice broke the trance in which Bell had fallen. Springing to her feet, she tottered to the bedside, and looked at the only being she loved in the world with an agony which I am totally unable to describe. There he was—in that bed—in the flesh—the harbourer of a soul. She could touch him, feel him, look at him; but yet—strange and incomprehensible fact!—in a short time he would be no more. His life was ebbing. The brief moments were fleeting, and an inexorable avenger would take him from her. Oh! it was hard to think it, still harder to believe it. She wished she could join him, and that their

spirits, kindred on earth, might be kindred after death, and wing their way through space together. A sigh, like the breathing of a new-born child, that was all that heralded the severing of the soul from the body of Arthur Lord Shorncliffe.

CHAPTER XXV.

SYMPATHY.

Lord Shorncliffe was dead: the fact was evident to all who were in the room. It seemed, from what followed, that his mother had hoped against hope; that she had expected some favourable change to take place at the last moment—in fact, that although she had been warned and advised of it by those professional men, who were too prophetic in their anticipations, she still clung to a straw of the most insignificant size—the ghost of a straw. When she could no longer conceal from herself the fact that he was dead, she gave way to the most passionate grief. Her proud spirit completely broke down, and she lost her individuality in the common sorrow of all who were in the chamber of death. He was her only son, and had all his life been a boy of great promise. It was hard to see him set his affections upon an unworthy object, but it was a thousand times harder to see him the prey of death. Yet it was almost a judgment upon her. She had solemnly declared to Dr. Fosbrooke that she would rather see him dead than the husband of Bell. It was an improper if not an impious declaration; but a certain allowance must always be made for a mother's feelings. Lady Shorncliffe was but a poor creature now her son was dead. The source of her

pride and her haughty spirit had passed away, and she was but the reflex of her former self. Her look of venomous hatred towards Bell had passed away. Death is a great leveller; it knocks down barriers and distinctions, and tramples out pride, very much as poverty does, with an iron heel. Bell noticed that Lady Shorncliffe's face bore a more subdued expression; but she did not think that her virulence towards her had disappeared. She fully expected to be told to leave the house—to hear it said that Shorncliffe House was no place for such as her, and that the chamber of death was sacred to those who were akin to the deceased; and she began to nerve her little heart for a great and fierce battle with the cruel people who she supposed were going to talk to her in this way. She swore, in her own way, that she would not leave her poor dear Arthur's body until the grave claimed it; and then no one could keep her out of the churchyard. She could wreathe the tombstone with immortelles, or plant daisies around the spot, where a few bits of green turf showed that one amongst men knew corruption. Bell felt that she had a right to be near him. Her heart was swollen almost to bursting, and she could not now restrain her tears. She was tired and worn out with emotion and watching, but she had nerved herself to meet the attacks of Lady Shorncliffe and her satellites, which she expected every moment. Nursing this defiant spirit made her bolder. She was dying to kiss his pale, clear face once more; to give him one holy, chaste kiss, which if he did not carry it with him to heaven

as a remembrance of her great, unselfish, and fervid love, would give some solace to her wounded spirit, which hung upon her lips like a bruised lily. She rose from her chair and walked towards the corpse, fully expecting some harsh reproof, some rude repulse; but she was mistaken. Lady Shorncliffe, with the utmost delicacy, moved on one side, and allowed her to approach. It was a strange sight—a melancholy picture, but yet not without interest. The wax-candles on the chimneypiece, a few drugs and bottles of medicine on various tables, the nurse or night-watcher half-asleep, half-awake, on a chair at the furthest end of the room, dozy and stupid; the proud but sorrow-stricken peeress—all her haughtiness, all her sarcasm gone, vanished, departed from her—dressed in a white flannel robe, trimmed with blue ribbon, how soon to be exchanged for black!—her hair brought securely round her forehead and knotted tightly behind, just showing the fine proportions of her brow, and an excellent frontal development. Bell, sad and lowly, like one who has lost her all, and has nothing left to live for. She did not think of the heavy legacy of disgrace he had left her; she only thought of the misery of being parted from him. Then, last of all, the cold body of Arthur mourned over by two women who would have given worlds for his transmutation from death to life. Pale and motionless, but still before their eyes. He was so beautiful in death that they found some difficulty in believing that he really was dead. It was a maddening thought, and Bell pressed her hand to her forehead as if to drive back some

unusual feeling. It passed away, and she bent down and kissed Arthur upon the cheek. It was a reverential kiss. Then, with a heart-broken sob, she fell upon her knees, this time uninterrupted, and prayed with the utmost fervour. She felt comforted and relieved. The maddening feeling which had hitherto possessed her went away, and softer sentiments took its place. Her religious communion opened a valve which prevented her losing her senses. When she was herself once more, and as she stood by the side of the bed drying her fast-falling tears, she heard Lady Shorncliffe's voice—

"You, too, loved him, my child."

Bell could hardly believe the evidence of her senses. She looked up with her red and swollen eyes inquiringly. Lady Shorncliffe took her by the hand, and drew her closer to her.

"You, too, loved him," she said once more. "Ours is a common grief."

By a gentle pressure Bell let her head fall upon the peeress's bosom, and they wept in concert. Their tears mingled, and for a time all distinctions were merged in the one great sorrow of the hour. All was still and quiet without, except the rolling noise of the waves upon the beach, as the pebbles knocked against one another at the force of the receding water. The occasional cry of a seagull rose upon the night air; but nothing was heard by those within, for their hearts were too full of their own lamentations. The grey dawn of morning broke at last, and the two women reluctantly retired from their posts to snatch a few hours of repose,

which nature imperatively commanded them to take. Sleep came to them almost immediately, and was never more acceptable, for their wounds were gaping at present; it required time to cicatrize and heal them. Bell sought her couch with her pain a little mitigated, owing to the friendly attitude of Lady Shorncliffe. It is so pleasant to meet with some one who can sympathize with you either in your great joys or your great sorrows!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE END COMES.

THE next day saw Lady Shorncliffe and Bell once more at the bedside of the dead man. Bell had arrived there first. She had surmounted the first shock, but it had left her very weak and ill and miserable. She felt that henceforth her life was objectless—in a word, she felt as all people do on losing a dear and intimate friend or relation. The room which contained the mortal remains of Lord Shorncliffe attracted Bell, she hardly knew why. She wished to be near him. He was dead; but still she wished to be near him. Lady Shorncliffe, on entering the room, averted her eyes from the bed where her son was laid out. Touching Bell on the arm, she drew her towards the window. She spoke.

"I have little or no right to speak to you, but will you allow me to say two or three words to you?"

"Yes," said Bell. "Say what you like, I shall be very glad to listen."

"Do you not think—that is, has it not occurred to you—that it is wrong to give way too much to one's morbid feelings?"

Bell looked up wonderingly.

"I mean that to be *here*, in this room always, is

scarcely right; at least, ask yourself, my dear child."

Dear child! thought Bell; what a change from Lady Shorncliffe's attitude some time ago!

"Yes, perhaps, it is not right; but, dear Lady Shorncliffe, I—I loved him so."

This remark was the signal for both of them to burst into tears. When the paroxysm was over, her ladyship said in a broken voice—

"Come downstairs. It is better that you should do so."

Bell suffered herself to be led away. They left the room, descended the stairs, and went into her ladyship's boudoir—a pretty little room, all gold and silk and satin. After they had seated themselves, Lady Shorncliffe said—

"Forgive the harsh remarks I made to you when I first saw you. Do not think any more of what I said then. Perhaps you have done wrong, but who is perfect? God has visited me heavily; and I am not now censorious. I like you, now—I feel a pleasure in your society because you were the object of his choice, and you loved him. Oh! I cannot tell you how I loved that boy. It was my love for him that made me hate you. I was jealous of you, and I formed such grand projects for him in my heart. I thought him good enough for a princess of the blood-royal, and when I contemplated the possibility of his marrying——"

Her ladyship broke off abruptly—she did not wish to hurt her listener's feelings.

"Pray, go on," said Bell; "I do not mind what

you say to me now. You talk so differently to what you did before. I know what I have done, and I am quite prepared to take the consequences. But there is one thing, Lady Shorncliffe, which I should like you to retract. You accused me of all sorts of dreadful things, and, amongst others, of being very bad and wicked. I assure you that I had never loved, or thought of loving, till your son met me. You did not believe me then, do you now?"

"Yes, my child, I do. I spoke hastily; but it was all through my love for him. I do not think I shall live long now he is gone. I had set my whole heart on him. He was all the world to me. But then—I only awake sensations that ought—that must remain dormant."

The tears streamed from her eyes as she ceased speaking, and Bell's were moist. Death had, indeed, overturned the barrier which Lady Shorncliffe had formerly regarded with so much reverence. She was talking to, sympathising with, and pitying the woman whom her son had loved, but whom he had not married. Bell felt intuitively that their new-born friendship could not be of a very long duration—it was out of the nature of things. Lady Shorncliffe treated Bell with every kindness, and all the courtesy of which she was possessed; and that was not a little. When the day for the funeral arrived, the hearse was followed by two carriages. One contained the inheritor of the title, Lady Shorncliffe's brother, and her ladyship; the other contained Bell. The heir-at-law had heard

all about Bell, and his idea of propriety was so strict, that he said if Bell were to follow the deceased to the grave at all, she must do so by herself. Bell's spirit was so crushed, that she made no opposition to this arrangement. She was not ambitious of going to see Arthur lowered into the grave in the society of the rich and great; she wished to show a simple tribute of respect to the memory of the departed, and she had her wish. It was all she wanted. After the funeral, Bell would not have gone back to Shorncliffe House had not her ladyship pressed her; and then she only consented on the condition that she should only stay long enough for a little conversation to take place between them. Lady Shorncliffe declared that she wished to speak confidentially to Bell. She could almost guess what was about to be said to her word by word, but still she went. Her cup of bitter was full—another drop more or less would make no difference to her. So she went. The first thing Lady Shorncliffe said was—

"You must forgive me if I ask you some things bearing upon your private life. I want you to tell me what you intend to do when you leave this place."

"I shall go to London."

"To London!—will you not want money?"

"I have enough to take me there."

"And then?"

"And then I—oh, I can work, Lady Shorncliffe."

"You will not—that is, I do not know how to put it to you. Temptation may be strong, and you are pretty and attractive."

"Do not be alarmed," replied Bell, with a look of quiet dignity and self-respect; "I have too much regard for *his* memory, and I will work my fingers to the bone before I do anything which can make him rest uneasily in his grave. I loved him—adored him while he was alive—and I do not forget him in death. Such love as mine does not vanish like a summer cloud."

"Can I do nothing for you?"

"Thank you, no. I should not feel justified in taking anything from you; besides, I am self-reliant."

"Your friends?" suggested Lady Shorncliffe.

"That is a part of my history with which you are not acquainted, Lady Shorncliffe, and I do not see that it would interest you who know little about me, and who are not likely to meet me again."

"Well, have your own way; I would have been of service to you had you allowed me. I wish you every success, and may this blight upon your young life soon wear off! You are young—I am old; it may bear me down, but you should rise superior to it at your age."

Lady Shorncliffe said this with a smile of encouragement, and Bell soon afterwards took her leave. It was night when she arrived in London, and she had something under ten shillings in her pocket. Why did she go to London? She knew not why particularly. London is the great centre of attraction for everybody—it is the magnet of the human race!

CHAPTER XXVII.

A NEW FRIEND.

When Bell arrived in town on the afternoon of a damp, cold day, she did not know what to do; her mind was a chaos. She had partially recovered from the effect which Lord Shorncliffe's death had upon her, and she wished to live, because she considered it wrong to wish to die. She had taken up her cross bravely, and resolved to bear it with fortitude. She did not like the idea of going home, because she was afraid of the plots and intrigues of the squire; he had done much to injure her before, and he would, in all probability, do as much more were she to return. His was a cold-blooded if not malignant nature, and Bell thought she was doing right in not giving him the least clue to her whereabouts. She had written one letter home when at the *Magasin* in Regent-street, and she made up her mind to write another after she had been a day or two in London. The great puzzle and difficulty with her at present, was where she should go to, and what she should do; she could not go to a hotel with the few shillings she had left; lodgings were also out of the question—she could get no room under three-and-sixpence or four shillings a week, and the money would be required before she would be allowed to take possession. She had a

little travelling portmanteau with her, and when the train arrived at the station, a porter took hold of it, and asked her if he should call a cab. She replied in the negative.

"Bus, miss?" asked the porter.

"No," replied Bell a second time, a little confused.

The portmanteau was heavy, and the porter, after taking stock of the fragile-looking being to whom it belonged, came to the conclusion that she didn't look like carrying it. If so, there was but one other way of disposing of it open to her.

"Oh, cloak-room, miss. This way," he exclaimed, and before Bell had time to divine his intention, or ask him what he meant, he had whipped the portmanteau up from the platform, where it had been resting, and led the way, at a quick pace, towards that railway mystery—the cloak-room. There, for a charge of twopence a day, a bewildered official will undertake to look after, and take care of, any package for you, or by paying additional sums of twopence, any amount of packages. What becomes of your box, or your carpet-bag, or your portmanteau, after its receipt over the counter by the overworked official is not revealed to the eye of man; it becomes part and parcel of other lumber. Nothing comes amiss to the authorities of the cloak-room; they will take a live snake with the same celerity as a dead dog. Nor will they grumble at game from whom the spark of life has departed. Were an enterprising person to wrap himself up in a horsecloth, and declare himself a mummy tempo-

rarily resuscitated on his way from Grand Cairo to Cornhill, I believe he would be duly cared for upon the payment of twopence. "Cheops from the Great Pyramid. With care. This side up!" The porter plumped Bell's baggage down upon the counter. The man in charge demanded her name; she gave it. He then asked for twopence; he had it. Upon the receipt of his standard charge, which he regarded affectionately before he placed it in the till, he handed her a piece of paper, which was a receipt for the luggage in question, and had certain of the company's bye-laws printed on the back. The porter touched his cap to Bell, as a hint that a donation would not be received unthankfully by him; but not being versed in the arcana of railway travelling, she did not understand the mute suggestion, and replied, mildly—

"Thank you."

He went away growling.

"What's the good of 'thank you?' I didn't think her up to much, but I did expect the price of a pint of porter."

And so Bell fell into disgrace through ignorance. She had disposed of her luggage for a time, at least until she wanted it. Her next care was to find some place where she could rest the sole of her foot, and she walked out into the yard of the London-bridge railway terminus—that mighty artery which disgorges so many thousands of passengers every morning, letting them loose to throng the streets and alleys of the city, and taking them back at night when the day's work is done. She mingled

with the crowd, and walking over the handsome granite bridge which spans the Thames at that point, she entered the city, and became lost and bewildered in the mighty rushing, hurrying mass of people who were intent on that most interesting and alluring of all occupations—money-grubbing. There were some like herself, whose day was purposeless and aimless, but they were the few, not the many. She reached Cheapside, and her attention was attracted by the sewing-machines displayed in the shop windows. She stopped and watched some girls at work, and wondered at the celerity with which they handled the little piece of machinery, which, in their hands, seemed to work so easily. Raising her eyes a little higher, she saw a placard pasted to the glass by a wafer. It was an intimation to the effect that a "clever young woman might earn from thirty shillings to two pounds a week at the sewing machine business. For information, apply within." Bell read this twice, to see that she made no mistake, and her heart swelled with delight and thankfulness at having so quickly found something which would not only give her occupation but remunerate her handsomely. She entertained no doubt whatever that with application she could soon learn the art of sewing by machinery, and in her simple-mindedness she thought she had but to ask and she should get what she wanted. She certainly knocked, and the door was opened to her. But in this case the major proposition did not contain the less. Bell was very nicely dressed, but in deep mourning;

she looked like a lady, and one of the girls, taking her for a customer, rose from her work and asked her politely what she would like to look at. Bell blushed, and replied that she did not want to buy anything; she had come about some employment. The smile of affability and the traces of respect faded instantly from the girl's face, an insolent, overbearing expression took their place, and she said, in a contemptuous voice—

"Sit down; Mr. Strong will be in directly."

This was one of the stings of poverty, but it was not the first Bell had encountered since she left the country. After a time the heart becomes blunt and leathery. You don't feel an insult after you get used to slights. It doesn't even fire your blood. It raises a sort of antagonistic feeling which, if you see your interests, will not suffer by letting your tongue loose, you give way to and pay the insulter in his own coin; but if you are likely to lose some material advantage by gratifying your sense of injury, if you are a wise man and a man of the world, why you put it in your pocket and place a mental note of admiration (for that, read detestation) against the name of that man who has caused you to chafe inwardly. But of all the charming and delightful things in human nature the suppression and annihilation of a Jack-in-office is certainly the most fascinating. Your professional and habitual bully soon subsides before a vigorous attack, and when he sinks into his boots what a poor creature he is. The girl went back to her machine, and carried on a conversation over her work with a

friend of hers who was managing the next machine.

"Party after a job," she said, with a scornful laugh.

"Wish she may get it," replied the other, with a significant smile.

Mr. Strong had stepped round the corner to get his matutinal drop, and made his appearance smelling odorously of gin.

"I mustn't let him make the mistake I did, or he'll be as savage as anything," muttered the young woman upon whom the care of the shop devolved in the absence of the master. Meeting him as he entered, she exclaimed—

"Young person, sir, after some employment."

Mr. Strong was a stout man, below the average height, and the *beau idéal* of a London tradesman, entertaining a vast idea of his own importance, and proud of having his name in a conspicuous place over his door; proud of his stock-in-trade, and much enamoured of a balance at his banker's, which grew favourably month by month. Putting on a consequential air he met Bell half way, by saying—

"My forewoman tells me that you wish for an engagement. Have you been accustomed to this sort of thing?"

As he spoke he put his foot upon one of the boards at the bottom of a machine, which, being pressed down, caused the wheels to revolve.

"No, I have not."

"Are you prepared to pay a premium?"

"A what?" asked Bell.

"Premium. That is, five pounds down for being taught the business. Can't do it for nothing, you know. You might learn all we could teach you and then leave us. Pretty flats we should be!"

Bell's heart sank and was drowned in those very waves of hope which before had buoyed it up.

"No," she replied, mournfully, with drooping head; "I have no money."

"Then I can do nothing for you. Sorry, but must have an eye to my own interests. If you can get your friends to pay the requisite premium I shall be glad to see you. Good morning. Door-handle turns to the left."

Turning on his heel he sat down at a desk, and busied himself with some accounts. Bell let herself out. When the door closed behind her, and she stood on the pavement once more, she hesitated a moment. The fact was, she did not know where to go to; she was lost in the metropolis. She could not go back to where she had been living in London before Lord Shorncliffe's death. She was very much in debt there, and Lady Shorncliffe had arranged with Bell to pay what she owed for her; so that avenue was closed against her. While she was thinking, she heard a husky voice—a cross between a raven and a bull-frog. It was addressing her.

"You ain't had no luck there, I'm thinking. You aint the fust by a long chalk as I've see go in there as if they had for all the world been made of ingyrubber, cock-sure of summut to do, and come out as if they had been washed and mangled, and had all the starch took out on 'em."

Bell looked about her to see who the speaker was. She looked to the right, to the left, up in the air, but saw no one.

"You've no call to look that way," said the voice. "I ain't far off."

Bell lowered her eyes, and saw a little, old-fashioned woman seated on the pavement, with a basket of oranges and nuts, which she was busily arranging. She had one of those old world straw bonnets on, coming up over her ears and protruding ever so far beyond the face; a black shawl, with many a hole in it, and a common Manchester cotton dress completed her attire. Her way of wearing the shawl was peculiar. She had brought it over her chest and round her back, and over her chest again, fastening it at the side with a pin. It kept her warm, but it did not conduce to the elegance of her personal appearance. She was one of that ill-treated race called costermongers. Her face was battered by the weather, but there was a good expression upon it; and Bell, in her loneliness and misery, felt attracted to her. The orange-woman rose to her feet, and said—

"I must not stop here. The blues will be upon me. Alderman Carden's no friend to us poor folks, so I'd better step it. Come with me, and I'll put you up to something better than sewing-machine work."

Bell, without any special reason for it, assented, and followed the old woman down a lane into Trump-street, where she led the way into a public-house. Bell entered it after her. It was not a time to stand upon ceremony, and the old woman

might, after all, be of service to her. Pulling threepence out of her pocket, Bell's new friend threw them down on the counter, and in her puny, squeaky voice, demanded—

"Two threeha'porths of Old Tom."

And this is how it came to pass that Bell Wilson drank gin in a publichouse situated in the heart of the City of London.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LOSING THE "'ANSELL."

THE old woman who had taken a fancy to Bell was an honest old costermonger. She gained an insignificant livelihood by the sale of succulent fruit, and thinking that the young person she had seen disappointed in the sewing-machine shop stood in need of advice and assistance, she generously resolved to render her all that lay in her power. The sluices of conversation were raised by the spirit they were imbibing, and the stream of talk flowed on swiftly. Bell told the old woman that she had not been many hours in London; that she was homeless and friendless, and did not know how to get a living. Her new friend, having a partiality for her own calling, strongly recommended it to Bell until she could do better, or until something turned up. At last Bell was persuaded to sell what few things she possessed, and embark in trade as a vendor of flowers, or whatever article was in most demand in the market at particular seasons. Bell asked the old woman her name.

"They never call me anything but Betsy," she replied, "and I've almost grown to forget my own name. I don't like to think of it. When I do let my mind settle upon it, old things come up, and I'm that miserable I can hardly keep a razor from

my throat. I've longed for some one to talk to like yourself. It's a great relief for a body to have some one to talk to. There was Emily Jane, who worked with me ever so long; but she went away with a seafaring man she fell in love with, through hearing him sing something about "Jolly young Watermen," and "Wapping old Stairs," in the tap-room of "Paddy's Goose," that's a famous place down in the east, and he took her to Indy with him. Ever since then I've been all alone, and got to hate everybody and everything. My place is a poor one, but you're welcome to a share of it, if you like."

Bell expressed her willingness to do so, and thought herself extremely fortunate to meet with so good-natured an old woman. Betsy announced her intention of knocking off work for that day. She had not done badly, and in order to celebrate the new acquaintance she had made, she thought she was fully entitled to a half-holiday.

Accompanied by Betsy, Bell went back to the station, received her portmanteau from the porter in the cloak-room, and with Betsy's assistance carried it to a pawnbroker's in the borough. She retained a few things which she stood absolutely in need of, and borrowed a little less than two pounds on the rest. Betsy looked upon this as a small fortune, and in glowing terms predicted that together they would make a colossal purse. Money and experience were to be allied, and the result was shadowed forth by the spirit of prophecy as something like the vision of a dream. Bell's next visit was to a shop where they bought the apparel she was then

wearing, and gave her some more in accordance with the character she was about to assume. Fully clad and equipped, Bell followed her companion to a clean if poor part of Bermondsey. It was not far from Spa-road. There was nothing poverty-stricken about the neighbourhood, and Bell felt a sensible relief when she saw her conductress stop at the door of a small house, with a neat little garden before it, open the door with a key, and enter. The parlour door was open, and a cheery voice exclaimed—

"Is that you, Betsy?"

The response being in the affirmative, the voice said further—

"Step in here a moment. I am going to take one of your oranges, if you haven't sold out."

Betsy complied with the request, whispering to Bell—

"Mrs. Mangles, the landlady. Come in after me."

Mrs. Mangles' parlour was the picture of neatness and order. The furniture was neither plentiful nor costly, but what there was of it was kept scrupulously clean, and made the house look like the abode of a thrifty woman.

"I have brought a lodger back with me," said Betsy. "She's willin' to pay a little more towards the rent."

"Oh! that doesn't matter; you can bring any respectable friend of yours here."

Mrs. Mangles laid a slight stress upon the word respectable. It did not escape Bell, for she flushed crimson; an involuntary act of indiscretion which

Mrs. Mangles noted only too keenly. It is somewhat remarkable that ladies who have lost their husbands, and been reduced to a state of widowhood, are wonderfully clever at detecting the slightest impropriety on the part of any other woman with whom they may come in contact. Mrs. Mangles had certainly attained the age of two score years "and the rest;" that is, she was nearer fifty than forty; she was stout and florid, her hair was not too thick, and she took a pride in greasing it. She cut it very short in front, so as to make it crisp over her forehead, the consequence of which was she was always in a state of semi-curl, and gave one the idea of having been obliged to liberate her tresses from the confinement of curling paper on a sudden, and before the curling process had existed sufficiently long to bring it to a successful termination. She was remarkably amiable in her manner, and was the personification of politeness. She knew how to simper when the exigencies of the occasion required that she should simper; and her smile, for a woman of her age, was the most fascinating in the whole district of Bermondsey, where the hideous smell of the tanneries usually inclines you to do anything but smile—that is, if your internal organization should be at all rebellious. Mrs. Mangles had an invaluable quality; she was like a female detective in plain clothes. She could see through you at a glance, reckon you up in an instant, and put a black or a white mark against you, as she thought proper. Her hands were rather more inclined to obesity than was exactly the thing,

even in the person of a two-score year old Venus. One of her lodgers had been an actor at the Pavilion Theatre, in the Whitechapel-road. Being of a complimentary nature, he was in the habit of denominating Mrs. Mangles the Venus of Bermondsey. One Christmas-time he had gone so far as to petition his landlady to go on the stage. He assured her that there was a fine opening for a Columbine, but she declined the offer, on the ground that the amount of agility she possessed would scarcely be sufficient to fill so arduous a part. This was the only offer that she ever had of appearing in public life, although her enemies and detractors—who is without them?—said that her husband, when alive, frequently did so. He was a man who, in his time, had played many parts. When he married he was holding a responsible situation in a merchant's house, but the finances of the establishment decreased in so suspicious a manner that his dismissal was determined upon. Then came the tug of war. The wolf, as is usual in such cases, made his appearance at the door, and made himself so obnoxious in various ways, that Mr. Mangles saw the necessity of doing something. The only question was what that something should be. A brilliant idea entered his head one evening, when discussing a quartern of gin over the bar of a public-house. It was his last sixpence, and as he was specially addicted to gin, he did his best to devise some exit from his difficulties His furniture had been levied upon for rent, and all the sheriff's officers had left him was an old broom, with which the yard of the

house was swept. Putting this under his arm, without saying a word to his wife, he sallied forth the next morning, and took up his position at what he considered a favourable crossing. This he sedulously swept, and it was admitted on all hands that the crossing did him credit. A new broom sweeps clean, so did his. When he had finished it he began to look about for his reward. But before he had time to take a single halfpenny, an eccentric looking Irishman made his appearance, with the stump of a broom under his arm. He approached Mr. Mangles, whistling "The Sprig of Shillelah and Shamrock so green."

They stood facing one another.

"Shure and it's clane and nate—clane as a daisy," said the Irishman.

At this moment an elderly gentleman, whose bump of benevolence was strongly developed, crossed the street. The Irishman held out his hat, and received a threepenny bit.

"That's mine," angrily cried Mr. Mangles.

"It's yours when you get it," was the reply.

The result of this adventure was that a fight ensued between the Irishman and Mr. Mangles, in which the latter was defeated, and subsequently buffeted about the head and shoulders with his own broom, which the Irishman confiscated to his own use as the *spolia opima* of the conflict. After that day Mr. Mangles assumed a new system of tactics. He abandoned the broom and the crossing business as only fit for low Irishmen, and he went about the streets soliciting the alms and the patronage of the

charitable, which was freely accorded him. He maintained, and with some reason, that there was no disgrace in pauperism, which was a state of things consequent upon ultra civilization. He alleged, in spite of the most violent assertions to the contrary, that Socialism was as rampant in England at the present day as it was in France during the Revolution of '89. When asked to prove his allegation and state in what the Socialism of England consisted, he brought his hand forcibly down upon the table, and said, "Poor-rates." In his new avocation he was successful: as a predatory member of society he grew rich. To his over-indulgence in the good things of this life, when working hours were over, he was able to trace his untimely end. One evening he returned home flushed with triumph. Somebody in Pall-mall had given him a sovereign—most likely in mistake for a shilling. On entering his house he saw nothing on the table but some cold meat and hot potatoes. "What!" he cried, indignantly, "cold meat and 'taters again! I can't stand that." And with all the pride of an affluent beggar displayed upon his charity-inducing countenance he adjourned to a neighbouring tavern, and there gave full licence to his fastidious appetite. His unhappy wife never saw him again. He fell a victim to apoplexy at half past seven o'clock the next morning, and was favoured by the parochial authorities with a parish funeral. After his death Mrs. Mangles was assisted by her sympathizing relatives, and she set up the business of a lodging-house keeper in Bermondsey. When Mrs. Mangles had helped her-

self to some of Betsy's oranges, the old woman went upstairs to her own room. She had but one. The bedstead, an old-fashioned Arabian, rather the worse for wear, stood in one corner, the table in the centre, upon a Kidderminster carpet, and one or two other little things completed the furniture, which altogether, at a broker's, would not have fetched a pound. Yet this was what Mrs. Mangles called a furnished apartment, and charged three shillings a-week for.

It was arranged between Bell and Betsy that operations should be commenced the next day. Accordingly Bell was up early, and accompanied her friend to Duke-square, where they bought a small stock, and departed in various directions to get rid of their wares to the best advantage. Bell did not know her way about London at all; but she wandered through different streets determining if she lost herself to ask her way home again. She reached the foot of Holborn-hill, and stood there a little while, resting her basket of fruit upon the ground, for it was rather heavy and tired her arm. She looked at the hurrying throng, and awaited a customer. She felt nervous, as it was only natural she should do; but when she reflected that no one was likely to see her with whom she was acquainted, her nervousness wore off, and she subsided once more into that callous calm which had animated her ever since Lord Shorncliffe's death. A man, who looked like a commercial traveller, afflicted with a strong liking for oranges, stopped before her, and, in a professional manner, began to haggle

about the price of this and the price of that. Betsy had fully instructed her as to the value of her goods; and when the customer offered her something like half the actual wholesale value for some oranges she refused it, saying, "They cost her more." Finding he could not get them at his own price, he went away, abusing itinerant fruit-vendors in no measured terms, and vituperating them as if they had been beasts of the field. Strange as it may appear, this was the only offer Bell had all day. Perhaps she did not go to a likely place, or she was unlucky; anyhow, the fact remained the same. When the evening began to fall, Bell retraced her weary steps homewards, disgusted and heart-sick at her bad luck, and thinking that she was the sport of evil fortune. When she reached the City she stood on the steps of the Royal Exchange, supposing that as it was a good situation, and there were numbers of people constantly passing and repassing, she might sell a few oranges, so that she might not go home altogether penniless. A man approached her as if with the purpose of buying something. She took one glance at him, and then, dropping her basket, regardless of the loss of its contents, she ran quickly away, and was lost to sight in the fast-gathering darkness. She had seen Tom Thorburn —honest Tom Thorburn; and there was no doubt that he had recognised her, as she heard his loud voice calling her by name, but she paid him no heed. Like a timid and startled fawn she ran, and he was powerless to stop her. When she got back to Bermondsey she had recovered from her surprise

and she asked herself why she should have run away from a man who loved her as she had done. The answer was slow in coming, but it came. She felt intuitively that she was not worthy of being the wife of Tom Thorburn. She did not come before him with clean hands, and she shrank from meeting him.

Betsy had already arrived, and eagerly demanded what luck she had met with. The answer may be guessed at. Betsy did all she could to soothe Bell, telling her that she would have better luck next time, and reciting a number of other homely sayings, which are the stock-in-trade of the unfortunate. The loss of the basket was the one thing which afflicted Betsy most, because it cost a good deal, and their sum of money would be considerably decreased in buying another. While they were having tea, Betsy requested Bell to tell her all her adventures during the day, as she had only given a brief abstract of them at first. When she heard about Bell's refusing to sell her oranges under cost price to the commercial gentleman, she held up her hands in amazement.

"Fancy my not telling you," she exclaimed; "that's losing the 'ansell!"

"What is that?" said Bell, rather puzzled.

"I don't know what it is, exactly; but it is what we call losing the 'ansell.' The 'ansell' is the first thing you sell—the first offer you get. If you refuse that, whatever it may be, you will have no luck all the rest of the day. I believe it—I have

often met with it. What a fool I was, to be sure, not to tell you about the 'ansell.'"

Bell made an inward resolution that in future she would pay more attention to the superstitious ideas of the costermongers, and never again "lose the 'ansell.'"

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS. MANGLES.

Mrs. Mangles had, in her own expressive phraseology, kept her eyes upon Bell. A model of propriety herself, she wished all with whom she came in contact to be the same. In her religion she was orthodox; she tolerated parsons, but she had not much idea of curates. The curate of her parish, who had not long been appointed to the cure of souls in the extreme east, was an enthusiastic young man, who secretly wished that his convictions would allow him to embrace the errors of Puseyism, so that he might suffer martyrdom for some cause or other, whether good or bad. But he had been brought up a Protestant; three generations of his family—he could trace his descent no further, and generally said that he was the lineal descendant of an expatriated Huguenot—had been Protestants, and he had not sufficient mind or sufficient courage to be anything else. He one day called upon Mrs. Mangles, the servant-of-all-work opened the door, and in a loud voice, which seemed to indicate that it fancied itself in the pulpit, he said—

"Who lives here?"

Mrs. Mangles was in her sitting room, the door was open, and she overheard this remark. Running out into the passage, she exclaimed—

"I do."

Not a bit abashed, the curate said—

"Have you any lodgers?"

"What's that to you?" was the only response that his impertinence elicited.

"Well, a great deal," he said, rubbing his hands together; "I like to make the acquaintance of my parishioners. May I ask what religion you are, and what place of worship you attend?"

"I am a Roman Catholic, and I confess to Cardinal Wiseman," promptly replied Mrs. Mangles.

"Good morning."

The parson took up his hat, and beat a speedy retreat from the heretical abode he had chanced to visit.

In commenting upon the affair, Mrs. Mangles was heard to observe—

"Parsons are very well in their proper place, but out of it they're nothing. I would as soon have a doctor continually about me as I would a parson. Parsons in their pulpits on Sunday are all very right, but parsons on week-days are as bad as a white frost in June."

One evening Mrs. Mangles gave Bell an invitation to come into the parlour. It was an honour and a condescension; and as such Betsy regarded it. Bell had gone out again with her oranges, and had done better. Her pretty face attracted some people, and the sad expression it wore invited custom on the part of others; so that Betsy was not dissatisfied with her earnings. It was evident at a glance that Bell had not got over the death of Lord

Shorncliffe; she was grieving inwardly, fretting in secret, and she could not help showing it in all she did. She spoke but little, and went about everything in a listless manner. A blight had fallen upon her at an early age, and, without something occurred to rouse her out of it, it was evident she would bring herself to a premature grave. She accepted Mrs. Mangles' invitation to come and see her for an hour or two, more because Betsy asked her to than because she had any inclination of her own. Mrs. Mangles had made preparations for her visitor on rather a grand scale for Bermondsey. She had muffins and crumpets, all ready toasted and buttered, piled upon a dish, which was standing in the grate and basking in the heat of the fire. There were water-cresses crisp and green, and a two penny haddock on a hot water-plate—like the wild boar at Roman dinner-parties—made the grand dish, and gave a somewhat epicurean appearance to the festival. To such luxuries Bell had for some time been a stranger. She did not repine at the loss. She imagined that by living in the strictly honest and unselfish way she did, and mortifying the flesh in almost every way, she was paying a tribute of affection to the memory of Arthur. She came, at last, to bless the accident which brought her in contact with Betsy; because it enabled her to live a quiet and primitive life, during which she could commune with herself and dwell upon all the glories of the past, when Arthur's love was lavished upon her. Poor child! the cross had fallen to her share—as it does to all of us sooner or later—but

she took it up bravely, and laid it across her shoulder; bearing it with quiet, unostentatious heroism such as it is good to look upon. Bell being bidden to sit down to the banquet, did so. She had no appetite for the viands which Mrs. Mangles had prepared for her in such profusion, but she eat a little out of courtesy. Her reticence with regard to the good cheer seemed to please her hostess, who filled up any gap she left with commendable celerity. Eating muffins to her was child's play, and crumpets in all their doughy elasticity were but a whet to an insatiable appetite. Water-cresses disappeared like chaff before a strong wind, and the way in which the haddock was disposed of was a caution to economical housekeepers. Considerably refreshed by the hearty repast she had made, Mrs. Mangles drew her chair near the fire, which she had lighted to air the room and boil the kettle. The evening was chilly, but the summer was not yet over; however, a little fire was extremely agreeable, and both the women found it so.

"Are you a widow, my dear?" said Mrs. Mangles, in an insinuating manner.

"No," replied Bell. "I—I have never been married."

As she made this reply, she thought of a ring she was wearing. It was one which Lord Shorncliffe had given her in the earlier days of their intimacy. She glanced down at the little piece of gold, and the blood rushed to her cheeks in a tell-tale manner.

"Oh! indeed," exclaimed her interrogator. "You must excuse the question, but you see you wear a

wedding-ring, and I thought that only people who had been to church did such things."

Bell made no reply. She felt these remarks of Mrs. Mangles more than she had done the cutting and insulting observations of Lady Shorncliffe, on the memorable occasion of her sudden appearance at Eastbourne. She was beginning to feel that she had done wrong, and these annoyances were some of the consequences.

"As you are an inmate of my house, you will allow that I have a right to question you," continued Mrs. Mangles.

"I do not admit that you have any right!" exclaimed Bell, hastily.

"You need not lose your temper over a trifling question. If you are ashamed of anything that you may have done, I do not wish to rake up the recollection."

Had Mrs. Mangles been a Q.C., in all the effective panoply of a silk gown and a horse-hair wig, she could not have put her leading questions more skilfully, or have framed them in a more embarrassing manner.

Instead of being excited or angry at this remark, Bell's heart softened. It recalled her lost love, and she burst into tears. Mrs. Mangles, who was not a bad-hearted woman, but who suffered from occasional attacks of intense curiosity, like most of her sex, to one of which she had given way on the present occasion, went over to Bell and tried to soothe her.

"Oh!" sobbed Bell, "if you only knew all—if you only knew, you would pity me."

"Well, well, dear, don't give way. There, sit up. I didn't mean anything, I'm sure," said Mrs. Mangles, in a kindly tone.

After a time, Bell recovered her serenity, and under the influence of the blandishments of her hostess, she detailed the history of her brief and fatal love. It was a relief to her to make a confidant of somebody; and as she poured out her trouble to the good-natured woman by her side, she felt that she was not so utterly isolated and cut off from the rest of mankind as she had been before. Mrs. Mangles' parting benediction that night when her visitor left her, was—

"Poor darling, God help her!"

CHAPTER XXX.

GOOD NEWS.

One of the institutions of London which Betsy helped to keep up and support was a Sunday newspaper. In order not to be invidious, I will not say which of the number which teems from the press on Friday evenings. They are all very much alike, from the *Observer* to the *Penny Newsman*. The Sunday paper was a great consolation to Betsy; it made her *au courant* with the latest police news, the aggravated assaults and wife beatings, the last new thing in swindles, and the raid against the costers by the authorities at the Mansion House. She was much gratified to learn how Nosey Ike, *alias* the Slogger, *alias* Tony, *alias* the Captain, had at last been arrested in the act of passing counterfeit coin, and committed for trial at the Central Criminal Court. Then there was the young man in great perplexity who applied to the magistrate for advice under the following circumstances: he had been married that morning to the most beautiful, but at the same time the most perfidious of her sex, who, after the completion of the ceremony, had left him and gone no one knew whither. It was also refreshing to know that Sergeant Atkins, from the Whitechapel district who had been severely wounded during an Irish

row, was rapidly becoming convalescent, and would shortly be able to leave the ward of the Middlesex Hospital, where he had been treated with every possible care by, &c. &c. The man who got tipsy at a charitable dinner, and when told to move on by a policeman, replied that "he was all right, as he had the Key of the street," afforded Betsy consummate enjoyment, which was increased when she read that it took three policemen to divorce the aforesaid gentleman from the lamppost, which he was embracing with the greatest cordiality. A good murder was worth a Jew's eye to Betsy, and the Sunday paper generally manages a murder every week either in London or the provinces. One Sunday afternoon Betsy and Bell had come home after selling all their oranges. They found the seventh day a very good one for the disposal of fruit, as the lower classes, who are addicted to it, leave their homes and kennels where they have been burrowing all the week, and endeavour to get a breath of fresh air somewhere or other. Betsy had fetched their dinner from the bakehouse all hot and steaming, in the earthenware dish divided into two compartments, the baked potatoes in one, and the pullet which Betsy had picked up for one-and threepence in Leadenhall-market, late on Saturday night, in the other. Poultry, Betsy said, was cheaper than butcher's meat, and a nice change on Sunday. The dinner had been consumed, with a pot of four ale from the adjacent public-house, and both Betsy and her lieutenant were discussing some spirituous compound in a little hot water. Betsy

was lying down on the bed reading a sheet of the paper. Bell was reclining in a wicker-work arm-chair, price three-and-ninepence, from the hawkers who pass by your doors, similarly occupied.

Suddenly Betsy exclaimed—

"Is your name Wilson, Bell?"

She only knew Bell by her christian name. Betsy was not in the receipt of her confidence; they had struck up an alliance offensive and defensive, but it never went beyond that.

"Yes," replied Bell, with some curiosity displayed upon her countenance. "Why do you ask?"

"It is?" again asked Betsy, as if she wanted to be sure of the fact.

"Yes," repeated Bell.

"Well I never," cried Betsy, "that beats everything."

"Is there anything about me in the paper?"

"There's something about Bell Wilson. Come and look."

With her heart beating wildly, Bell rose from the chair in which she was sitting, and approached the bedside. Betsy held out the paper, keeping her finger fixed upon a particular spot. Eagerly taking it, her eye caught the paragraph which had arrested her friend's attention; it was amongst the advertisements nearly in the middle of a column. In order to get at it, you had to wade through oceans of announcements made by speculative attorneys and quack doctors, the gratis distribution of number two with number one of some cheap publication such as "The Mysterious Mistress, or the Penitent

Painter of Pentonville, with full and startling particulars of the man who cut his own throat by mistake and bled to death in Ratcliffe-highway;" or, "The Sailor of Shadwell, being the History of the Daring Duke and the Demon of the Deep. A Romance of Reality, which, affecting personages in the highest ranks of society, cannot fail to create an interest only paralleled by Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe."

Then followed the notice given by "The only astrologer now in England, Zemob-Bemob-How-Cho, who may be consulted daily. Applications containing stamps duly attended to. N.B.—No application containing *less* than twelve stamps will be answered, as the process of casting a nativity is laborious and expensive."

Skipping all these, and many more of the same description, Bell came to the advertisement which Betsy supposed affected her. She saw, in leaded type—

"Bell Wilson.—If this should meet the eye of Bell Wilson; she will hear of something very much to her advantage by calling upon Mr. Beecroft, Solicitor, Lincoln's-inn-fields."

Sitting down on the side of the bed, Bell ran over this advertisement several times. She had no doubt whatever that she was the Bell Wilson referred to, but her difficulty was to find out whether she was sought after by a friend or an enemy. Perhaps Mr. Weston White was endeavouring to find her; or more likely still, her friends at Oak Tree were raising Heaven and earth to

meet with her. If this were the case, she would not call upon Mr. Beecroft, as she would rather die than fall into Mr. White's clutches again. Her experience of his cunningly-contrived ice-house was such as not to induce her to patronize that asylum again, if she could possibly avoid doing so. If her mother and father were on her track, she was equally unwilling to return to them, because she was ashamed to do so. It may seem odd that she should be so scrupulous, but she felt that all sorts of rumours and stories must have got about concerning her during the three or four months she had been away from Warwickshire. When questioned, what account could she give of herself? what could she say to the anxious parental inquiries with which she was sure to be beset? It was this that deterred her from going home and throwing herself on her father's protection and kindness, for she was very proud, and notwithstanding all her reverses, had a rebellious spirit which counselled her not to expose herself to the gibes and sneers of those who had formerly hated her on account of her good looks, and would now lose no opportunity of laughing her to scorn if she came back with the least taint or soil upon her reputation.

"I don't want to know your secrets, my dear," said Betsy; "but if that concerns you I should go to the Lincoln's-inn-fields lawyer, and see what it all means."

"I will think about it between this and to-morrow," replied Bell, a little drily.

That evening she sought Mrs. Mangles, who

was glad to see her. When she saw the advertisement, she said—

"Go, by all means. It may be something for your benefit. They cannot hurt you, and to tell you the truth I do not think you are in your proper position here. You are worthy of something better."

The end of the conversation was that Bell was persuaded to dress herself in her best the next day, and pay a visit to Mr. Beecroft. After many inquiries she found his office, and knocked timidly at the door. She almost expected some hulking policeman, with a drawn truncheon, to spring out upon her, and make her his prisoner; but nothing of the sort happened. The squeaky voice of an articled clerk, whose pale face and general appearance indicated that he was fonder of dancing-saloons and late hours than the business he was being brought up to, exclaimed—

"Come in."

This she was not slow in doing.

"Who do you want?' demanded the dissipated clerk, looking impudently at her, with all the libertinism that half-fledged boys affect.

"Mr. Beecroft. I have come about an advertisement."

When the clerk heard that he immediately assumed a deferential attitude, and with the best sort of bow he had at his command, said—

"Mr. Beecroft is within. Will you step into his room, Miss?"

The attorney was sitting in a comfortable chair

at a table covered with briefs and papers, marked in a way having peculiar significance for a young barrister. Mr. Sergeant Watkins, twelve guas.; with you, Mr. Armstrong, Cons., two guas. Upon another was endorsed, Re Williamson, case for Mr. Granger's opinion, one guinea. On this one, In the Exchequer, Knox *v.* Bragg, Mr. Wheller, five guas.; with you, Mr. Sherman Palmer, Q.C. All this possessed no interest for Bell, who scarcely noticed the papers lying about, or if she did do so only to think how useful they would be to light the fire of a morning.

"Lady, in reply to advertisement, sir," exclaimed the clerk, who, with his pen behind his ear, looked like a half-plucked porcupine.

"Take a seat. Miss Wilson, I presume?" said Mr. Beecroft.

"Yes," answered Bell, sitting down as far away from him as she could.

His manner was very respectful, and Bell did not know what to make of it. It fairly puzzled her.

"I am happy to say, Miss Wilson, that I have some very good news to communicate to you," began Mr. Beecroft, wreathing his mouth in smiles, after the manner of lawyers when they are pleased.

Bell looked at him inquiringly.

He continued—

"It is not right of me to keep you in suspense. You may as well know your good fortune at once. Lady Shorncliffe——"

"What of her?" cried Bell, now really interested.

"Died a fortnight ago. She never recovered the

death of her son. She died, possessed of a great deal of property, the major part of which she has left to you by will."

Bell gasped for breath, and turned so pale that the lawyer hastily touched a small alarum which stood upon the table. This summons brought the dissipated clerk, who was told to bring a glass of water, which menial office he performed with more grace and alacrity than would reasonably have been expected of him. The water revived Bell. The lawyer took her by the arm, and placed her in his own chair, which he wheeled near the window, having previously opened it to permit the air to penetrate and fan her cheeks. The atmosphere of Lincoln's-inn, owing to its contiguity to St. Giles's and Clare-market, is not too salubrious, but in the present emergency it was better than nothing.

"How do you feel now?" asked Mr. Beecroft, kindly.

The shock was rather sudden; but joy never kills people.

"There, that is better. We shall soon be well again."

"Thank you very much," replied Bell; "I am well again now."

Mr. Beecroft left her a moment, to get some document out of an iron safe. Having found what he wanted, and untied the red tape with which it was bound, he said—

"This is the will of her ladyship. If you will allow me to read certain passages to you, I shall be able to explain better to what you are entitled."

Bell nodded her head; and he proceeded to inform her, in a monotonous voice, that she was the legal possessor of all that messuage and tenement situate and being at Ventnor, in the Isle of Wight, called Little Ridge, which was worth a clear five hundred a year, together with the sum of twenty-five thousand pounds invested in the Three-per-Cents, "which, my dear young lady," he added, suavely, "will give you an income of over twelve hundred per annum. And now, allow me to congratulate you! Some little formalities will, of course, have to be gone through. I must be certified of your identity. I must have a certificate of baptism, and two or three other things, which I have no doubt we shall satisfactorily accomplish."

Bell took his proffered hand and shook it warmly. Arranging to call upon him again at a time he appointed, she took her leave of Mr. Beecroft, with her head almost swimming at the unexpected piece of luck with which she had met. Lady Shorncliffe dead! How soon she had followed her son to the grave! Bell pitied the haughty woman, and shed many tears over her melancholy end. Her generosity to Bell, in her last moments, showed that she had forgiven her, and had endeavoured to make some reparation for the wrong her son, Arthur Lord Shorncliffe, had done her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

BELL proved her identity to Mr. Beecroft's satisfaction, and that gentleman took quite a fancy to her. He gave her the best advice on all occasions and on all subjects. Acting upon his suggestions, she left London, and took up her abode at Little Ridge. The house belonging to the estate was small but sweetly pretty. It was situated upon the ledge of a hill, upon what in Switzerland would be called a plateau. It faced the sea, and was surrounded by timber. The hill sheltered the house from the fierce north-wind, and the trees kept off the blast from the east. Towards the south it was open, and a splendid view of the ocean was obtained. It was some distance from Ventnor, and owing to the ascent, which was very steep, Bell was obliged to keep her ponies in a stable at the foot of the hill. She parted with Betsy and Mrs. Mangles, who had been kind friends to her in her adversity, with every demonstration of regret—making both handsome presents of money and other things. She promised that when she got settled in her new abode they should come and see her; but Betsy petitioned her so strongly, and in so earnest a manner, to take her with her to the Isle of Wight, that Bell had not the heart to refuse; and, relenting

at the eleventh hour, although she had before that made all her arrangements to the contrary, she consented to Betsy's accompanying her in the capacity of companion, housekeeper, and servant-of-all-work. By Bell's directions, Betsy represented her mistress in the neighbourhood of Little Ridge as Mrs. Wilson, a widow; and more than one resident called upon her. Bell received her visitors with every politeness, but intimated to them that she wished to live a life of seclusion, and would consequently be unable to return the visits they had been so good as to pay her. The oddity of such a proceeding was talked about at first, but it was gradually forgotten; and if anybody inquired who lived at the charmingly romantic villa at Little Ridge, the answer would be, "An eccentric lady who has a distaste for society." But if Bell did not go amongst the rich and great, she did amongst the poor and lowly. Her whole existence was devoted to charitable industry. She was the best friend the poor people ever had in those parts, and they blessed her for miles round. In her asceticism and her charity could be traced an undying regret for Arthur. She acted as if she wished him to look down upon her from his home in the sky and approve of what she was doing. She was very fond of walking along the seashore when the tide was out, and watching the wavelets gliding over the golden sand with many a bubble and boil. She would sweep the horizon with a powerful glass she carried with her, and note the position of various craft as they sailed swiftly along.

It happened on one occasion that she had strayed farther than she was accustomed to, and the inrushing tide warned her rather suddenly that if she were commonly prudent she would at once hasten homewards. It wanted some hours before night would come on, so that Bell was not in the least afraid of being caught in the darkness. Her only apprehension arose from the risk she ran of being overwhelmed in the angry flood, which was making such quick and violent leaps inwards. The precipitous cliffs frowned upon her from above, and many a mew and curlew gyrated over her head as they uttered their melancholy note. The tide would lave the foot of the rocks, the base of which had been hollowed out by their action like a basin; and Bell knew, from what she had been told by the fishermen, that at floodtide there was six feet of water under the cliffs. Gathering her dress around her, she hastened home. Three good miles had to be traversed before she reached the welcome spot, and some part of the way was anything but easy and comfortable walking. In one or two places heavy landslips had taken place, and the shore was strewed with heavy boulders, through the intricacies of which it was difficult to pick a passage. Bell set herself bravely to the task, but she was obliged to draw nearer to the cliffs, minute by minute, in order to avoid wetting her feet. She hurried on, her lips compressed and her brow bent, for she was now fully alive to the danger and peril of her position. Dark clouds began to gather out at sea, and a strong wind blew them inland. Heavy

drops of rain fell and splashed in the turbid waters, which were now lashing themselves with foam. Huge waves sprang up in the Channel as if by magic, and rolled tremendously along with a large crest of white foam, which looked ominous and menacing. The billows ran rapidly towards the goal they proposed for themselves, and dashed up against the beach with a sullen roar. It was impossible for Bell to conceal from herself that she had been very imprudent. She had carelessly strayed along without taking note of the tide, which on former occasions she had always studied with great exactness. Innumerable stories of people being benighted and cut off by the tide flooded her mind, and in her eagerness to escape such a fate she ran, as fast as her little feet would carry her, until she was out of breath. Panting with exertion, her cheeks glowing with the exercise and with fear, she was obliged to slacken her pace. Nearly under the brow of the cliff now, she had to pick her way through the stones, of various sizes, which lay about in all directions. The rain now came down in torrents, and she was soon wet to the skin. The wind howled and tore along in a wild manner, as if prognosticating some dire misfortune. The sea was within a couple of yards of its boundary, and yet Bell was a good mile from her destination. She felt a strong inclination to sit down on a rock and allow the fickle waves to overwhelm her in their deadly caresses. Then she would rejoin Arthur. She had formerly longed for some accident—some chance which would take her off quietly—for some

means by which she could leave this earth without the stain of deadly sin upon her soul. And now it was before her, ready to her hand; but the wish to live sprang up strongly in her breast, and when the danger was most imminent she found that life still possessed some charm for her; and although her fate was in her own discretion, she would not rush upon it. Her efforts to escape never ceased; but soon the water lapped upon her feet—in a few more minutes running over and covering her boots, laving her ankles, and forcing her to hold up her dress still higher. This impeded her movements very much, and she did not make so much progress as before. At last she moved with positive difficulty, and the force of the waves nearly threw her over more than once. In her terror she shrieked aloud, and to her excited fancy the blast mocked her. Again she sent forth a fierce cry, winging its way upon the bosom of the storm-cloud, and a second time she heard what she considered was a mocking echo. With a heavy heart she gave herself up for lost, and continued, without any heart and without the slightest hope of saving her life, to struggle through the rising waters—a laborious and difficult task, which soon brought on extreme exhaustion and weariness. Worn out by alarm and violent exertions, Bell was about to lean her back against the rough and jagged surface of the rocky cliff, and let the sea do its worst upon her, when she heard a loud splashing noise close beside her. A voice shouted something to her which the angry wind smothered and she found herself raised in a powerful grasp

and seated on something where she was out of reach of the insatiate sea. A man on horseback had rescued her in this timely manner. He had evidently been out for a ride, and the tide had surprised him as it had surprised Bell; but being on horseback he had been able to make better progress than she had. But a very short distance now had to be travelled before they arrived at the foot of Little Ridge. Bell had no idea how near home she was until she arrived there. The strong arm of her rescuer encircled her, and she felt that she was safe. The horse struggled gallantly through the body of water which impeded his path, and eventually landed his double burden on dry land. Bell, on being carefully placed on her feet, was profuse in her acknowledgments and thanks to the stranger who had arrived at so opportune a moment. He requested that he might be allowed to see her home, which proposition she made no objection to. When they reached her house she could do no less than ask him to step in, which he did. The road up the hill was not too steep for a horse, although it was for a carriage; and leaving his steed outside, tied to a holly-bush, the stranger followed Bell into the morning-room. Ringing the bell, she ordered candles to be brought, for it was growing dusk. When they arrived, she asked her preserver if he would have a glass of wine or a little brandy; he replied that he should prefer the latter, as he was very wet. She produced it immediately, and as she placed the bottle upon the table she looked closely at her visitor. It struck her that his fea-

tures were not only familiar but were known to her. He, however, did not evince the least symptoms of recognition of her. After drinking the brandy, he exclaimed—

"We are both so wet that I think it will be only prudent to change our things as soon as we can. You are at home. You will not think me rude if I run away at once, will you?"

"Oh dear, no!" replied Bell.

"I shall do myself the honour of calling upon you to-morrow," he said, "if you will not mind."

"I shall be very glad, indeed, to see you," answered Bell; and he went away.

Soon after the sound of his horse's hoofs was heard in the road outside, and Bell went upstairs to take her things off. He had given her no opportunity of questioning him, or she would have done so. She thought she could not be mistaken in her surmise, and she resolved to settle the question when he paid his promised visit. He punctually kept his word, and was at Little Ridge early the next morning.

After the usual compliments had passed between them, Bell said—

"I had not time to thank you for saving my life, which you undoubtedly did last night; but believe me I am not ungrateful."

"You are very good to say so," he replied; "I am only glad to think I was able to be of any use to you."

"It would be more singular still if we were old acquaintances," observed Bell.

"Old acquaintances!" he said. "May I ask what you mean?"

"I think we have met before. Am I right in supposing that you come from Warwickshire?"

"Yes," he answered.

"From Appleton?"

"Yes—you are certainly right."

"And that you are Mr. Charles White, of the Hall?"

"By Jove! How do you know all that?" he cried, in astonishment.

She raised her eyes to his, and replied quietly—

"I am Bell Wilson."

"The devil!" he exclaimed. "That is—excuse me—I was never so amazed in my life. Are you, indeed, Bell Wilson?"

"You are surprised to see me here, and in this position."

"I cannot tell you how rejoiced I am at this meeting," he said.

"Why so?" demanded Bell.

"Because I have been obliged to leave home owing to the odium I incurred through your disappearance."

"Indeed!"

"Your father and Tom Thorburn accused me of knowing where you were, and of having a hand in your abduction. I was mobbed once in Appleton, and my father thought it better that I should go away for a while."

"Is it possible," said Bell, "that you did not know the real author of all my trouble?"

"I answer you, frankly and candidly, I did," replied the young man.

"And you would not betray him?"

"No. I thought it better that I should be temporarily under a cloud than that he should be stigmatized in any way. I hope you will not consider me rude in asking why you have never returned home?"

"For many reasons which I cannot explain to you," she said, blushing. "I have written occasionally to Oak Tree, so that they know I am alive."

"But that is a poor consolation."

"I cannot help it. I owe a duty to myself and to others as well as to my parents."

She said this with dignity. Her manner repelled any further questioning on his part.

"Would you mind, Miss Wilson," he said—"would you mind seeing some of your friends, and clearing me from the suspicion I am labouring under?"

"But that would only prove the guilt of your father."

"That is true. I am still in a dilemma. Will you accompany me to London, so that we may see my father? I could telegraph for him; together we might concert something."

"To tell you the truth, Mr. White," replied Bell, "I am afraid of your father. I do not wish to hurt your feelings, but he has behaved like a bad man to me."

"Yes, I am bound to admit the truth of that. But with me you would be perfectly safe; and if we

could devise any means out of the difficulty, you would release me from a most unpleasant and wearisome exile."

"I should be glad to do that."

"Will you make the effort? A trip to London is nothing in these days."

"I do not care about that," replied Bell. "Will you give me a little time to think over your proposal? I am very much bewildered, and I have been so for some time past. The events of my life have been so singular: at one moment persecuted, at another loved—that is, tenderly cared for: now poor, now rich. I get quite confused occasionally. I shall be happy to oblige you, but at present I do not feel capable of coming to any decision."

Mr. Charles White thanked her for her kindness in entertaining his proposal at all, and arranged to see her again shortly. Bell reasoned with herself, and turned the matter over in her mind in a thousand different ways. The end of her deliberations was that she would go to London, and she intimated as much to the young squire when he again called upon her. Betsy she left behind her to mind the house; and when the old woman saw them go off together to the railway-station she looked knowingly after them, and thought that it would not be long before Little Ridge had a master as well as a mistress.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN AWKWARD OCCURRENCE.

CERTAINLY Bell Wilson's affairs had been ordered very strangely by fate, and her accompanying Charles White to London was not the least peculiar occurrence that had befallen her. She felt that she was simply doing him an act of justice, and she was also swayed by other considerations. She began to think that she was not behaving at all well to her parents. Her father, she was fully aware, loved her fondly, and her mother cherished a rough sort of affection for her. Her great obstacle and objection hitherto had been that she did not come before them as she was when she left her home, and her pride was so great that she could not tolerate the idea of being despised by those to whom she was most intimately related. She also deprecated an interview with Tom Thorburn. She knew that she could never be anything to him now. Their relative positions were so changed, that a meeting between them would be very unpleasant to Bell, and extremely painful to the poor fellow who had the misfortune to cherish a hopeless affection for her. Still Bell thought she owed it to herself, and the ideas of religion which she had lately cherished and made much of, to make some sort of approach to her mother and father. Go down into Warwickshire she would not; any-

thing but that she was willing to do, but that was too great a penance—too distasteful an undertaking. While staying in London she had no objection to sending for her parents and holding an interview with them in town. During her journey she turned these things over in her mind, but found it difficult to come to any determination. Charles White treated her with the utmost respect and deference. Had she always been a lady—had she been born and bred one, he could not have been more studiously attentive and more scrupulously polite. This was more than Bell expected from him. She thought that he would have looked down upon her and treated her newly acquired wealth and position with contempt, as he had been acquainted with her when she lived at Oak Tree, and knew her whole history and her antecedents—which, truth to tell, were none of the most brilliant, being rather more romantic than respectable.

Bell was very fond of railway travelling when the train went quickly. To her the scream and whistle of the engine had a peculiar signification: it was emblematic of progress. The pleasing panorama of woods, fields, lakes, trees, and cattle, with the cosy homesteads nestling beneath the brow of a hill or in the bosom of a leafy covert, attracted her attention irresistibly, and the successive changes that the rapidly-progressing train brought about reminded her of the most varied and extensive dissolving views. Once or twice, when averting her gaze and bringing it back from the outlying prospect, Bell found Charley White's eyes riveted upon

her countenance. His gaze was instantly withdrawn, and he with great industry busied himself in the perusal of some book, or hid himself behind the capacious folds of the daily newspaper. Whenever this happened a vivid crimson flush poured itself into Bell's cheeks and diffused its bright vermilion all over her head and neck; but of this reciprocal feeling he was ignorant. When the train arrived at the end of its journey Charles White, like an amiable cavalier, called a cab, saw the luggage properly disposed, and handing Bell into the vehicle, quickly followed himself—telling the driver to go to an hotel in the Strand, with whose comforts and discomforts he was tolerably familiar. A short drive brought them to their destination, and Charles White dismounted first of all to assist Bell out of the carriage. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and the street was thronged with pedestrians, amongst whom Charles White suddenly recognised a face that was well known to him. Bell was in the act of stepping on to the pavement, but he pushed her violently (almost rudely) back again, saying, in low and hurried accents—

"For God's sake, stay where you are!"

Bell did as she was told, although she was quite at a loss to account for his motives in acting in so strange a manner. Sitting down again, she quietly awaited the next commands that might be given her. While she was in a state of expectation she heard a voice which she knew at once to be Tom Thorburn's. Then she understood why she had been requested to keep in the background.

Crouching back upon the cushion of the cab, scarcely daring to draw her breath, Bell anxiously awaited the result. She did not fear anything for herself. Tom Thorburn was nothing to her. He had no control over her, and she would have met him a dozen times in one day unflinchingly; but her feminine reasoning, her womanly instincts told her that for Charley White to be seen with her, at such a time and at such a juncture, would be more injurious and detrimental to his character than almost anything else which could occur. Therefore, for his sake, she tried to compress herself into as small a compass as she could, and she shrank as far back as it was possible for her to go in the corner of the unclean and dingy London cab which the exigencies of travelling had compelled her to patronize. She could hear the two men conversing. The conversation was stiff and constrained on either side, which could not be wondered at. Charles White was accused by the Oak Tree Farm party of having been either instrumental or privy to the abduction of Bell—therefore he was mistrusted and disliked by them. Suddenly Bell turned pale: a new and prolific source of danger forced itself upon her mind. After the manner of females when travelling and peripatetically inclined, she had her name painted upon her boxes, two of which were outside the cab, with the ominous name of Wilson displayed upon them in all the glory of white paint upon a black opaque ground. If Tom Thorburn should catch sight of this, his suspicions would be at once aroused; and he would without doubt, in his blunt,

country manner, insist upon looking inside the cab. If he found Bell there his suspicions concerning Charles White would be more than ever inflamed; indeed, to a man infuriated with rage and jealousy, an explanation at that particular time would be out of the question. Bell's heart beat quicker, and she prayed that the catastrophe, which was only too imminent, might be averted. Charles White did not think of the tell-tale paint upon the luggage; his only care was to keep Tom's rotund countenance out of the cab. As long as he stood chatting outside upon the pavement he did not mind; but although he was not aware of it, he was standing upon ground deeply mined, which only required the least scintillation to make it heave and split and send him flying in a fragmentary condition towards the Olympian Mount. The discovery came at last, as it was inevitable it should do. Tom Thorburn happening to cast his eyes upwards, caught sight of the name of Wilson. He instantly broke off in the midst of a discussion as to the probable fate of Bell, whom he was telling the young squire he had seen one night on the steps of the Royal Exchange carrying a basket of oranges.

"Hulloa!" he cried, in his broad Saxon, "what be that?"

"What do you mean?" said Charles White, casting his eyes upwards in the direction indicated by Tom's wondering glance.

He started as if he had trodden upon something venomous. All his calculations were defeated by the merest accident, and he at once saw how deeply

he was compromised with the man who confronted him. Tom's countenance formed itself into a rigid and inflexible representation of injured innocence and misplaced confidence.

"Who ha' you got inside?" he said, pushing Charley White on one side with his brawny and muscular arms. "Who ha' you got there, I say?"

The next instant he was by the side of the cab. Opening the door with a wrench of his powerful fist, he looked in. Bell was sitting up to receive him, pale but determined. What she had dreaded had come about; but they should both see that she was equal to the occasion. Not a single doubt existed in Tom's mind that he had at length, by his perseverance, discovered the intrigue which he had all along believed existed between herself and Charley White. Were they not in the same cab together? Were not her boxes upon the roof with his portmanteau alongside of them? Their eyes met: his flashed with indignation, but she did not quail before him.

"Bell!" he exclaimed, in a reproachful tone, in which suspicion was mingled.

"Well, what do you want here?" she replied, coolly.

"Nought," he replied. "It isn't wi' thee I've gotten to settle accounts, tho' I be main sorry for thee, lass, main sorry."

"When I want your pity I shall ask you for it," said Bell, with all the sarcasm she possessed; "until then you had better keep it, you may require it yourself."

During this colloquy Charles White felt himself in a most unpleasant position. He scarcely knew what to do. He did not like to deprive Tom of the poor privilege of conversing with Bell for five minutes if he chose to do so, and yet he was afraid of some sudden ebullition of temper on the part of the rustic, which would probably have himself for its immediate object. Tom Thorburn said no more to Bell; but boiling over with passion at what he thought the double-dealing, the smooth-faced hypocrisy, and the palpable lies of the young squire, he withdrew his head from the cab and faced, as he thought, the destroyer of Bell's virtue, happiness, and prospects, together with his own peace of mind, and the domestic pride and felicity of the people at Oak Tree.

"You rogue!" said Tom. "You poor creature! I've got it in for thee. I've all along promised it to myself when the time came, and now your lies will na' serve you any longer."

"I give you my word," replied Charles White, solemnly and earnestly, "that I only met Miss Wilson a day or two ago in the Isle of Wight, and you can believe me or not, but I had never seen her until that time since she left the county."

Tom smiled incredulously.

"Thee'st lied to I afore," he said. "Thee lies be no good to thee now. Thee mun ha' it, so look to yoursel'."

As he spoke he turned up his sleeves, and it was evident that he meant mischief. Charles White looked around him for a policeman, but not one was

to be seen. A crowd had collected round him and Tom Thorburn; but with the apathy and phlegm of the British nation, no one offered to interfere. Tom Thorburn, mindful of former favours received at the hands of the young squire, who, in the Warwickshire fields, had proved himself a proficient in the pugilistic art, thought that he would not risk a second mauling; but he was burning for revenge, and this feeling, in rough, vulgar, and uncultivated minds, always finds vent in brutal outrage. A man of refinement and education can always inflict a severe wound with the polished dart of satire, but a common man must have recourse to his fists, in order to open the floodgate through which his rage must either flow or drive him to distraction, by being pent up in a narrow compass. So Tom, without any preliminary sparring, caught Charley White under the arms and held him in a strong and tenacious grip, which fairly forced the breath out of him. He did not give him the least chance of displaying the science with which he was acquainted; he took the bull by the horns, and brought matters to a crisis at once. Compressing his body with all his might until he made his ribs crack, Tom raised him from the ground and flung him from him with prodigious violence. Charles White fell on his head in the roadway, and was picked up by a policeman as near dead as could be. As the hotel was nearest, and as he had the appearance of being a gentleman, he was carried into the hotel. If he had been a poor man they would have taken him to Agar-street and have put him in one of the

wards of Charing-cross Hospital. Bell followed mournfully. She began to think that she was born under a stormy constellation; that she was predestined to have no peace on earth, and that her life was to be a stormy one and an unquiet. She had seen the waves of one existence ebb and flow, and finally sink to their lowest. Was she to be a witness of a scene similar to the one she had lately gone through? She fervently hoped not: but she took up her position in the sick-room, and listened anxiously to what the doctors told her. The *dictum*, as such things usually are, was vague and uncertain. They told her that he might live and he might not. It was a toss-up. Four-and-twenty hours would decide. Skull badly fractured. Very dangerous accident; and so on. Bell felt it her duty to watch by the bedside of Charles White. She would have done the same for any one else. It was not because she entertained any kind feeling for him, or because he had received his hurt partly through her. She saw that the sins of the father were being visited upon the child, as is very often the case, and she felt sorry for him; but in this case sorrow was not akin to love. Far from it. She was merely fulfilling one of the holiest of religious commands. What she did she performed out of charity. She instantly telegraphed to Mr. Weston White, briefly informing him that some dreadful accident had happened to his son, and requesting his immediate presence, as the doctor did not know whether he would live out the ensuing day. She worded her message as well and delicately as she could. But

when you have to tell a parent that his son is dying, it is difficult to clothe so black a thing in white. After this was done she sat down on a chair, and watched the poor young man, sighing and moaning as if his heart was being picked to pieces by ravenous birds of prey, as the liver of Prometheus was by the vultures. She would rise and smooth back his rich dark hair, and wipe away the damp from his forehead. If she saw the parched skin of his lips cracking and breaking, she would gently squeeze the juice of a grape upon it and moisten it, thereby reducing the inflammation. Hers was the hand that gave him to drink when he felt as if all inside him was a raging fire, like the molten mass which heaves and rolls beneath the earth's crust. Had Tom Thorburn seen her attention to the man he looked upon as his rival, and whom he had punished as the seducer of Bell, he would have been a fit applicant for admission into Bedlam or St. Luke's; but this was spared him. Hearing the consequence of his violent act, he was about to make his escape through the crowd which had collected, when a policeman laid his hand heavily upon his arm, and in no very polite and studied language told him that his presence was required elsewhere. He had witnessed the assault, which, in the official mind, was one of a very aggravated nature.

So Tom Thorburn found Bell at last: but it would have been better for him if he had never seen that young lady again, for he had put the life of Charles White in jeopardy, being guilty of a grievous wrong without knowing it, and he had succeeded in estab-

lishing himself in the not very pleasant quarters of a station-house. As he sat down on the bench which ran round the walls of the gloomy cell in which they had temporarily incarcerated him, Tom thought over his altered prospects. When Bell had first disappeared a blight fell upon him, from which he had never recovered. It weighed him down, and ground him into the very earth, and his spirit lacked the elasticity and spring of Antæus to rise again. Unable to bear his life in the country, he went to London. All his taste for farming vanished, and he went wandering about the busy, bustling London streets, looking for Bell; peering into every face, and prying under every bonnet and parasol to see if he could meet with her. When he saw her on the steps of the Exchange it was a relief to him to know that she was alive; but her running away from him only confirmed his suspicions. If she has nothing to be ashamed of, why does she avoid me? he argued. He thought of the night on which he had told her to come to him if she ever wanted a friend, and he was hurt and wounded at her showing so much repugnance to do so. He tried to pursue her, but she was too quick for him, and as we know got away. Then Tom walked about the City for days and weeks looking for her. He wanted to meet her face to face, and speak to her. He flattered himself that his remonstrances might be of some avail, but he never set his eyes upon her again until the fatal hour in which he saw her in the Strand. He asked about Charles White's condition, and when they told him in what a serious state he

was, he could not drive away a feeling of fierce exultation. He supposed that the young squire had systematically robbed him of Bell. He looked upon him as the destroyer of his happiness, and he thought him a double-dyed villain who ought not to be suffered to encumber the face of God's earth. And by a singular process of specious reasoning he brought himself to think that he had done a good deed in ridding society of a pest, who was a blot upon its surface. What would become of himself he did not care. If they took his life it would rid him of a burden which had become almost intolerable. Bell could never now be his, and without her existence were pointless, objectless, blank. He would have the satisfaction of knowing that he had avenged the wrong done to himself and the old people at Oak Tree, and that if his life were to be forfeited and he were to swing on a gallows, or more probably be transported for life, his victim could not enjoy the society of Bell, although he had done so much to win her. Of course, Tom's conclusions were entirely erroneous, because he proceeded upon a presumption which would not hold water, and he had made his deductions from a premise founded in error. But after a time the pains of captivity fell upon him, and he wished that the past could be recalled. The stern reality of a gaol sobered him, and he began to question whether any woman were worth a man's hazarding his neck for.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN THE POWER OF A MADMAN.

When Weston White received Bell Wilson's telegraphic message, he was thunderstruck; he did not know that it was despatched by her. It was not that which surprised him; it was the fact of his son's life being in danger. He had never contemplated the possibility of a misfortune of that sort happening to him. He had often anticipated failures in commerce, a sudden run upon his bank, which would necessitate his suspending payment; money losses may happen to any man, however clever, because the principles of the commercial world are of such a nature, that the failure of one reckless or dishonest trader may bring about the smash and the ruin of twenty straightforward reputable men, who have never in their lives cooked an account, or given a bill which they knew very well at the time they had no manner of chance of meeting when it arrived at maturity. But a domestic calamity, such as the one which had just come to his door and knocked loudly at it, was without the pale of what he had hitherto regarded as probabilities. To lose his son, in the prime of his early manhood, in the midst of his rich promise, was a blow such as unnerved and prostrated Mr. Weston White. When you lose money or land, you have a

chance of retrieving yourself and getting it back again, but when death steps in, and gibes and jeers at you, and mocks you, laughing you to scorn with fierce derision, there is no remedy. Since the world began, the grave never gave up its dead, and in the present year of grace it is not more accommodating than it used to be. If Charles White died, who should he have to leave his riches and his possessions to? Who would transmit the name to posterity? Like every *novus homo*, Mr. Weston White wished to perpetuate his dynasty—he did not wish to go out of the world and leave no sign that such an individual as himself had never existed. In pursuance of this pet project of his, he had a man down from London to paint his portrait and that of his son. There was a miniature of his father, the solicitor, and he had a copy taken from that. He hung these up in a gallery, and said to himself—

"That's the way the Earls of Derby began; everything must have a beginning. In the year two thousand the Whites of Appleton may be a fine old family, while those that are at present accounted so will have died off, and become worn out."

But if his son was taken from him before he was married, and without leaving any issue, male or female, his hopes were nipped in the bud, and he was defeated at every point. He made up his mind to run up to town directly, and see what he could do for him. Very likely his presence would restore him to himself; at all events, he would

ensure good attention and the best medical advice for him. The old man resolved to do a thousand things directly he arrived in London, and he wished that he could go with telegraphic swiftness, for a suspicion crossed his mind that his son might be dead before he reached him. It was necessary for Mr. White, as he was going away from home for some time, to deposit some papers in a place of security; he thought of his ice-house, and putting on his hat, he rapidly crossed the park and made for it. When he arrived, he took the curiously-shaped key from his pocket which gave him admittance, and opened the door. The ponderous block swung back, and he entered. The light streamed in, but it was dark as night in every other part of the ice-house, from which the rays of the sun were excluded. Weston White knew so very well the position of everything in the place that he could find anything in the dark, so that he had no difficulty in groping his way to the opposite end, where, on a table, lay a little glass d[illegible]filled with matches. He was in the act of striking one of them, when a heavy blow, evidently dealt by a man's fist, descended upon the back of his head. With such force was it delivered, that it knocked him to the ground, where he lay at the mercy of his assailant. Whether the man had been concealed in the ice-house, or whether he had been waiting outside and had followed him in as soon as the door was open, was a question which, in his ordinary state of mind, Mr. White would have found it difficult to answer; but in the mental confusion

which the severe blow he had received had brought about, he was incapable of coming to any conclusion, except that he was in the power of some ruffian, who most likely wanted to rob him. He had not lain on the floor long, before he felt a rope passed around his hands, and the hard pressure soon informed him that he was being strongly bound. When this operation was concluded to his captor's satisfaction, the door was shut and fastened on the inside by the key, and a light in a few seconds illumined the apartment. A harsh voice told the squire that he might get up now; he did not move, however, until a kick, administered by a heavy hobnailed boot, roused him to a sense of his position. Rising with difficulty to his feet, he looked around him, speechless with rage. Before him stood a man in a pair of common corduroy breeches, surmounted by a velveteen jacket; a rough fur cap set jauntily upon his head completed his attire. A broad grin distended the man's face, as he said—

"Don't you know me, squire?"

Weston quite did know him when he spoke, and he very speedily imbibed a conviction that he had fallen into the hands of a Philistine. The man who had given him the ugly blow on the head was David Manning. The angry flash faded away from the squire's eyes when he saw who his assailant was, and gave place to a dull, subdued look, which almost amounted to despair. But recovering his courage, as well as he was able, he determined to parley with Manning, get the interview over, submit to the inevitable extortion, and go off to

London at once to see what he could do for Charles.

Sitting down upon a chair, Mr. Weston White exclaimed—

"You have got the best of it this time, my man. The game is yours; you have played for it and won it. It may be mine again soon, but I suppose I must knock under now to you."

David Manning grinned another of his prolonged sinister grins, but he made no audible remark.

"How much do you want?" continued Mr. White. "How much money will you take to undo this cord which you have tied infernally tight, and let me go?"

"I don't want no money," replied David Manning. "It isn't money that I want."

"What is it, then?" said the squire, quite astonished. "Do you mean to tell me that you don't want money? What have you committed this outrage on me for? What did you steal upon me in the dark and knock me down for, eh?"

"Well, I'll tell you, squire; I didn't do it for money—I did it for *revenge*."

As David said this, the grin passed away from his face, and his countenance assumed a stern appearance, which was not at all re-assuring to Mr. Weston White.

"For what! don't be a fool, my man. If you want twenty or thirty pounds to make a start with, you can have it. I don't like to be hard on a fellow."

"You never were, squire, eh?" said David, in a

sarcastic tone. "You never came down sharp on me? You never sent me to the treadmill? You never kept me shut up weeks and weeks? Why, you're turning coward, squire, and trying to soap me over. Who put a charge of swan-shot into me one night outside this ice-house? Who bowled me out in that matter of Bell Wilson—the girl you had shut up here? You did that uncommon cleverly. Licked me completely; but I've beat you this time. You wont crow over me this journey."

Weston White began to feel uncomfortable. He had always been dubious of David Manning's sanity, and he was unquestionably in his power. He knew that the man's moral sense was so blunted and deadened that he would stick at nothing. He thought that perhaps the bribe he had offered was too small a sum to be accepted. David had everything in his power, and he would have been a fool to have taken twenty pounds when he could get a hundred, or perhaps more than that. This was the squire's way of reasoning, so he said—

"Look here, Manning, I don't want to quarrel with you. You think yourself an ill-used man, and if I were to talk to you till doomsday, I should not be able to convince you to the contrary. Still, I have right on my side, and if I were to say anything, I should remind you that whenever you were sent to prison, it was for an offence against the law. You were found trespassing on my estate. Come, now, listen to reason. You want money?"

"I tell you I don't," he returned, in a dogged tone.

"Oh, yes, you do!" replied Weston White, with a knowing smile. "I wasn't born yesterday. The fact is, I suppose you think you have me in your power, and you expect much more than I offered you. Twenty pounds isn't worth your acceptance, is it?"

"Twenty thousand wouldn't move me," cried David Manning in reply to this—"I'm stone. You're very clever, squire, and very soft sawdery, but I'm too old a bird for you to come the old soldier over. Your chaff isn't good enough for me."

At his obstinacy, Weston White grew angry; in a petulant voice, he exclaimed—

"Here, undo this cord. I don't want any more of your d—— nonsense. I want to go."

"You wont go," said Manning, decidedly.

"Don't be a fool," cried Mr. White. "I can't afford any more time to talk to you. You fellows never seem to think that a gentleman has anything to do with his time. You needn't be afraid that I shall not pay you the money. You shall have a hundred pounds, if you like. I wouldn't give it you at any other time; but just now I want to be off to London at once. A hundred pounds, do you hear? It will set you up for life. You can take a public-house, and live respectably by way of a change."

"You wont go to London no more, squire," said David.

"Do you mean to keep me here?" asked Weston White, quite bewildered at this new phase of th affair.

"I'm like a man who's caught a rare bird, or a big fish, and who doesn't care about parting with it all at once," said David Manning, composedly. "No, squire. I've got you, and I'll keep you; and I'll do what I choose with you. I'll lay a half-penny you never thought of this sort of thing happening when you built your ice-house; but strange things happen in the quietest families."

"But didn't I tell you, my good man, that I must go to town on most important business?" said Weston White, getting red in the face with anger.

"It'll have to wait, then," replied Manning. "I can't spare you, squire. I've got such a fancy for you, that I wouldn't part with you for the Prince of Wales himself."

"Oh, you don't know what you are talking about. Pull your knife out of your pocket and take and cut this cord. You shall have the money all right. I promise you that; and something more at the back of it, if you make haste. The fact is, Mr. Charles has met with an accident."

Manning's eyes gleamed malignantly, as if he felt a pleasure in hearing that something had happened to a man who had been amongst the number of his enemies; indeed, his words proved it. He said—

"I wish him dead. I haven't forgot that cut under the ear he gave me."

"The accident's bad enough; you needn't wish that. The doctors don't know whether the poor boy will live or die. So you see, Manning, that I must go."

"He may die then for what I care, or for what you'll do to help him," replied David.

Weston White lost his temper altogether at this—

"You dirty low scoundrel," he said. "Why, if I wasn't tied and hampered like this, I'd murder you!"

"Mind I don't murder you," said David, significantly.

The squire, forgetting that he was bound, jumped up, and made a rush at Manning; but finding himself utterly impotent, he bent down his head, and charged at the man, like a battering-ram, as if he was going to butt him. This is a favourite mode of offence in some parts of America; and much damage may be done to your antagonist by a well-directed blow of the head in the pit of the stomach. But David Manning was too quick for the squire. He stepped on one side. The intended catapult passed harmlessly by him; and when the baffled squire raised his head, for a second attack, a very neat left-handed blow caught him on the forehead, just between his eyes, and toppled him over as if he had been a cork filliped off a dinner-table by a man's finger.

Manning waited calmly with his fist raised to repeat the blow. But it was not necessary. It showed Weston White that violence was quite useless, and that if he succeeded in doing anything with the ruffian, who had him in his power, he must do it by persuasive measures and coaxing. It was humiliating to have to stoop to do this, but there

was no help for it. Getting up again, as soon as the effects of the blow had passed off, he sat on a chair, and gazed sullenly at the carpet. David looked affectionately at his huge brawny fist, and said, as he fondled it affectionately with his other hand—

"It's a good sort of fist enough, isn't it, squire? I call it my bull-dropper. I'll back myself to drop any bull you like to put me on to with it. It comes a little heavy, don't it? Wants a thick skull to stand knocking about by it; one something like yours, squire. Well, I'll put it away now, but mind you it's always ready in case you should be took suddenly bad, and want another dose."

"Now, Manning," said Mr. Weston White, suavely, "you have had your fling; and a pretty good one you must admit it's been. You ought to be satisfied. You will gain nothing by keeping me here—nothing whatever. So you had better untie my hands and let me write you a cheque for the money. I haven't got above fifty in notes about me."

"Let's have them," said Manning.

"Certainly. They are in this pocket at the side. You will find them in a Morocco leather pocket-book—take them, and you can have a cheque for the rest."

Manning took the pocket-book, examined its contents, undid the roll of notes, shook them, held them up to the lamp, and let the light shine through the transparent tissue-paper—marvelling much at the fineness and beauty of the water-mark—and

then he put them back again, afterwards concealing them about his person. Weston White's eyes brightened; he thought that his gaoler had relented, and was listening to reason at last.

"Come along," he exclaimed. "Make haste here. I have no time to lose. The train goes in an hour or two. I am late as it is. I shall be obliged to have my portmanteau sent after me."

But David Manning never offered to move—never so much as stirred one step.

"Be quick, my man! look alive!" cried Mr. White. "You have got the money; what more do you want?"

Instead of replying, David took his pipe out of his velveteen jacket, and proceeded to finish a plug he had left from the morning. He lighted it over the chimney of the lamp, and puffed away in silence.

"What are you waiting for?" said the squire, getting more impatient every minute. "Undo this and let me out, will you? I can't be kept here all day just to please your absurd fancies."

"If you don't hold your noise, I shall have to make you," replied Manning. "I ain't going to be worrited by you. When I'm smoking I like to be quiet."

"Wont you let me go?" exclaimed the squire, a light suddenly breaking upon him, and showing him that he had been duped.

"I never said so."

"But it was implied in our bargain. You were to have the money for an express and specific

purpose—and that was to let me go. You don't suppose I should make you a present of fifty pounds for nothing? Why, it is not likely!"

"Any how you don't go from here, and that's flat!" was the only reply that he could get, and that was uttered in a coarse, brutal tone.

"Not go! what do you mean?" asked the astonished squire. "You wont let me go?"

"Never!" was the emphatic answer. "I'll tell you what, squire—you may as well know it soon as late. You'll never leave this place alive. You shall hear what's on my mind presently; but one thing's clear—and that is—your lease is pretty nigh run out."

Mr. Weston White tried one more plea.

"But my son Charles is dying!" he said.

"No account, you'll go to —— together," replied David Manning.

The squire looked at Manning, who sat facing him like a judge. The simile seemed to strike Manning. too, for he said—

"You have often sat on the bench at Appleton, squire, when I've been lugged afore you between two policemen, and you've passed sentence on me as an incorrigible rogue and a vagabond, but you wont do it no more. I'm top sawyer, and I'm judging you, and I'm gallows glad to think that it's come to my turn. You call to mind my leaving the county after that 'go' when young Mr. Charles hot me behind the car. You thought then you'd got rid of me, I'll be bound, but you hadn't. I wanted you to think so, and gave out at Appleton

that I'd gone to Australy; that was because you shouldn't keep a look-out for me. I went on the tramp then, and I got took powerful bad. It was something in my head, they said. They shaved all my hair off, and told me I was mad because I talked about ice-houses and finding girls there; but I wasn't mad—it was all true enough. At last they said they'd cured me, and I went away; but I wasn't long in coming back to Appleton. And then I thought how nation easy it would be to follow you into your ice-house, and do what I have done to-day. I hate you, Squire Weston—I always have hated you; and I've swore to have my revenge. You beat me last time; but this time I'll forgive you if you do—I will. You beat me this time, and I'll forgive you all I owe you, and put it down as a bad debt. You can't do it. You've got to die, squire, afore twelve o'clock to-night."

As David proceeded with this speech, Mr. White experienced a variety of sensations. He saw that he was in the power of a man of erratic mind who was not, strictly speaking, responsible for his actions. He had always been a man of an excitable and irritable temperament. Being fired at laid the first stone of his disorder. Letting his thoughts dwell upon the ice-house, and the mysteries of it, assisted, and the persecution he endured at the hands of the justices put the climax to it. The squire began to grow very uneasy indeed, and to think that what David Manning said was too true, that his days were really numbered. The sorest trial of all, though, was being debarred from flying to

Charles, who at such a time would have appreciated his father's care and presence. To Mr. White the thought of his son dying without himself being by the bedside was as bad as his dying without benefit of clergy and out of the Communion of the Church. It was a great fall for his pride to be obliged to humble himself before a common tramp and poacher, and then to find all his submission useless and unavailing. His life was very dear to him, and he tried again to move David, but without success. The man was obdurate, and would listen to nothing. He had sworn, he said, that the squire should die, and he had come expressly to kill him. This was not cheering intelligence. Its effect upon Weston White was to unhinge him altogether. He saw, from David Manning's face and manner, that there was no hope; but although this conviction was firmly planted in his mind, he could not abandon an expectation that some unexpected means of delivery might and would present itself at the last moment. It was silly of him to be so credulous under the circumstances; he should have prepared for death, but he could not bring himself to think of it. A few hours ago he was one of the leading men in the county, possessed of everything that he could wish for, and now he was a prisoner in the hands and at the mercy of a madman. Feeling ill, and faint, and exhausted, and thinking that it would do him good, Mr. White told Manning to look in a cupboard and bring out some wine which was kept there. The man did so with alacrity, and, strange to say, made no objection to the squire drinking

some; he even held the glass to his lips himself. This excessive civility rather alarmed Mr. White. "Has he poisoned it?" he thought; but the temptation to drink was so great that he risked the consequences of what was, in reality, a rash act.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A BAFFLED MURDERER.

THERE was nothing strikingly maniacal about David Manning's appearance, although there could be little or no doubt that the man was mad. He had been brooding over his wrongs, real and imagined, until his brain had become turned. But to look at him, as he sat in the squire's circular apartment, you would not have taken him for a dangerous lunatic, or to describe him with rather more mildness and forbearance than he deserves, an uncomfortable monomaniac. Mr. Weston White, unfortunately, was thoroughly in the ruffian's power, and altogether unable to help himself. He saw the man dispose of copious draughts of wine, and hoped that he would indulge freely enough to become intoxicated. He was, however, too seasoned a cask. He could take an almost incredible quantity of spirituous liquor without losing the use of his faculties. After he had refreshed and invigorated himself he proceeded to business of a more serious nature. Taking a clasp-knife from some part of his waistcoat, where it had hitherto been concealed, he opened it, and ran his thumb along the edge, as if to satisfy himself of its sharpness. The condition of the edge seemed to please him, and laying hold

of a piece of stout cord, which he had come provided with, he began to measure it. He uttered an exclamation of disappointment. It was not long enough, apparently, for the purpose he had in view. Standing on a chair, he unhooked a lamp which hung from the ceiling by a short chain. With a peculiar recklessness he allowed this to fall to the ground with a crash that ruined it. Placing the cord over the hook from which the lamp had been suspended, he got down from his pedestal and examined it critically. It was too short. His purpose plainly was to hang the squire, and when Mr. White saw the preparation that was being made he came to this conclusion with no slight alarm and terror. David Manning went about his work with an eagerness that showed it was an occupation after his own heart. There was no hesitation—no wavering about him—not an atom. The shortness of the rope puzzled him. He had brought a tolerably long coil with him, but the best part of it was round Mr. White's hands, much to that gentleman's disgust. After some deliberation an idea struck him. If he made his prisoner stand upon a chair the difficulty would be bridged over. Going up to Mr. Weston White, he exclaimed, roughly—

"Time's up. You're bound to swing."

The squire had expected this, but the imminency of the danger, and the near prospect of his speedy dissolution, made a child of him. To be launched into eternity without a moment's warning, is at any time a dreadful thing, but to be turned off in a

vault by a madman—to die a dog's death, and for no crime, no fault, was excruciating.

"My dear fellow, you cannot be in earnest. There is some mistake—you are joking with me," he said, in piteous accents.

"You may call it a joke if you like, squire," replied David, with horrible calmness. "It *is* a joke to me, but to you it is no laughing matter, I should think."

"For God's sake listen to me."

"Well, squire, have your say; it wont hurt one way or t'other, only time's up," said David, carelessly.

"You must have lost your senses," said Mr. White. "You forget who I am, what position I hold in the county, and all that. Besides, you ought to know that you will be hanged for murdering me."

"My father was hanged, squire, for horsestealing, down in the north," replied Manning. "It runs in the family, but my time isn't come yet. If I do swing it wont be for you. You see it's this way: I've thought on this for ever so long, and if so be as your people search the ice-house for you, they will find you hanging from the ceiling. I shall kick the chair over when you're dead, so that it will be a clear case of felow-d'ye-see, or whatever you call it. Oh! I'm fly, squire—I'm all there. I shall let myself out, put the key in your pocket, and work it all right. You needn't be alarmed for my safety. Come on, time's up."

Saying this David Manning went up to the

squire, and having made a noose in the rope, placed it over his neck, observing as he did so—

"Calcraft couldn't have fixed it better."

"Don't be a fool!" cried the squire, in an agony of terror, his teeth chattering and his limbs shaking. "You—you wouldn't murder me!"

"Wouldn't I? You'll see, guv'nor," replied David Manning, with a forbidding laugh.

Taking the squire's rather spare body up in his arms, he lifted him on to the chair which he intended to serve as a drop. Then he readjusted the rope. Mr. Weston White was paralysed; he could not say or do anything, and he went passively like a lamb to the slaughter. It was a terrible moment. He could feel the rough cord compressing his windpipe, and he shuddered at the frightful coolness with which David Manning did everything. Suddenly he felt the chair kicked from under him. A choking, throttling sensation deprived him of the power of thought, and shut out a bitter vision he had before his eyes of his poor Charley on his deathbed. A rush of blood to the head took place. He felt his eyeballs starting out of his head. He could see David Manning squatting on his haunches holding on to the rope with the greatest tenacity; but just as he gave himself up for lost—just as the throttling became unbearable—just as he felt himself on the point of losing his senses, a grateful reprieve came to him. He was lying upon the floor, with the horrible curses and imprecations of his executioner ringing in his ears. The rope had broken. The black blood retreated from his swollen

features, and he breathed freely again. He thought he was respited, but he did not know David Manning. Blaspheming awfully, the latter advanced to the prostrate gentleman, and told him, in the foulest language, to get up. He did so with difficulty, and looked wildly around him. Although he had only been suspended in the air for the fractional part of a minute, still he was much bewildered. Brandishing his clasp-knife, Manning swore that if he attempted to move he would stab him to the heart. Dexterously cutting the cord which bound the squire's hands, he unrolled its folds, and Weston White was comparatively free; but his faculties were so benumbed that he was unable to take advantage of the opportunity. Manning, holding his knife between his teeth, and placing his back to the wall, knotted the two pieces of rope together. They were long enough for his purpose. He then attempted a second time to place the rope round the squire's devoted neck; but seeing it was now or never, and that if he did perish in struggling for his life, he would be in no worse position than he was before, Weston White clenched his fists as well as he was able, for the joints were stiff, and with all the ferocity of a tiger he sprang upon the cowardly ruffian who was hungering and thirsting after his blood. With an instinct, for which he could not account, the squire made a grasp at the knife David held in his hand. He seized it by the haft, and wrenched it away; but as he did so his assailant succeeded in throwing the noose of the rope over his head. At this he pulled energetically.

The squire did the best thing he could do under the circumstances, he cut and slashed away at David's hands. The knife was not of much use for stabbing, the point was too blunt; but for doing sabre sort of duty it was invaluable. David Manning was enraged beyond measure at this totally unanticipated attack. Resistance from his captive was the last thing he had expected. Weston White fought fiercely, as a man who fights for his life may be imagined to fight. The odds were now in his favour. By the strangest accident, by the snapping of a few strands of hemp, everything had been changed and altered. He did some execution with the knife he had taken from Manning, and which he wielded in a lucky or a clever manner. His opponent's left hand was already quite disabled. A cut extended all along the back of it below the knuckles, which severed the tendons, and laid the bones bare. A torrent of blood flowed from the wound, and Mr. White did his best to injure Manning's right hand in a similar manner. The rope round his neck kept on choking him every time Manning pulled at it, but the principal pressure fell upon his neck in that part which is called the nape, so that it was not so much hurt as might have been expected from the formidable attack of the ex-tramp and poacher. By chance he contrived to slash the other and at present uninjured hand, which was doing him the greatest injury by using its force for the purpose of strangling him. A dreadful gash appeared. Manning, by these two successful cuts, was terribly maimed. He let go the rope, which fell to the

ground, but he had no intention of relinquishing the contest. Raising one of his feet in the French fashion, he administered a *savatte* to the squire, which took effect upon his jaw, and sent him rolling heavily backwards. David Manning was upon him in an instant; his poor shattered hands were of no use to him whatever; they streamed with blood, and hung in a helpless manner by his side. Catching the rope short up its length in his teeth, he sat down on the ground, and planting his two feet against the squire's head, he held it between them in a grip of iron, and dragged at the rope with a violence that nearly extracted his teeth. The squire kicked and struggled, but his efforts and endeavours were of no avail; he was again literally under the heel of David Manning, and whatever that man's virtues were mercy was not one of them. Foaming at the mouth with rage, he strained every nerve to bring about the strangulation of his enemy. Weston White's face blackened; the veins in it threatened to burst; blood flowed from his mouth, his eyes, his nose, his ears; the bones in his neck cracked, and soon he succumbed to David Manning's frantic efforts, and lay a disfigured, distorted corpse upon the floor of the building which had been a curse to him since its first erection. David would not relinquish his dental grasp upon the rope for some minutes. He was desirous of making sure of the death of the squire, who, in dying, had left him a legacy he was not likely to get rid of for some time. Those long, hideous gashes across the back of each hand, from which the blood was still

flowing freely, were the parting gifts of the dead man, and likely to prove of more serious import than David Manning liked to think. When a certain time had elapsed, and there was no longer any room for doubt as to Mr. White's being dead, David let go the rope, and rising to his feet proceeded to reconnoitre. He smiled in a gratified manner at what he saw. The man whom he imagined had punished him wrongfully, and in a manner almost amounting to the persecution of inveterate hatred, had fallen beneath his determined and persistent attacks, and was no longer capable of doing him any further evil. He had not much time however to brood over his revenge, for his own hurts were assuming so serious an appearance that he was compelled to investigate their condition. The blood still ran from them, although it was clotting here and there; and it was evident that if the hæmorrhage was not allayed in some way he would inevitably bleed to death, but he was powerless to prevent the effusion of the vital current. If he could have tied a piece of his shirt, a bit of his neckerchief round the wounds, he would probably have been saved; and this he would have done instantly, cheerfully, and with pleasure, but the hacking way in which the tendons had been severed utterly prevented him from moving his fingers. His right hand was as powerless as his left. Had he been engaged in some severe battle, and lost both his arms by a cannon-shot, he would not have been more helpless than he was at present. He tried in all sorts of ways to move his fingers, but they were

no longer prehensile. He could grasp nothing, and in addition to this he felt himself growing weaker every moment. The carpet in several places was saturated with his blood. He was in a most forlorn condition, and he could not help thinking that his opponent, who was wrapped in the silent mantle of death, was in all respects better off than himself. He could not even pour himself out a glass of wine to stimulate and revive his flagging energies. It was very clear that if he did not do something, and that quickly, he would himself die miserably. If he could get out of the ice-house and find his way to Appleton, a surgeon would attend to him, and he would live, but the key of the door was in the squire's pocket. He had himself slipped it in there, and without the assistance of his fingers how could he extract it from its receptacle. Perhaps he could bite it out, and holding it in his teeth, place it in the lock, and so emerge from his prison. It was with difficulty that he began to move now; the loss of blood had made him as weak as a calf that has been copiously bled previous to its being slaughtered. Sinking on his knees he fell to work, and gnawed at the waistcoat pocket of the squire as a hungry Esquimaux may be supposed to gnaw at a piece of semi-frozen leather. He found it harder work than he had expected, and the material his teeth had to encounter was tougher than its appearance warranted. To augment the troubles of the murderer the lamp began to flicker and wane, and threatened soon to plunge all in darkness if it were not speedily supplied with oil, a can of which

stood in the cupboard from whence the wine had been taken, but it might as well have been at the bottom of one of the petroleum wells in Upper Canada, for it was of no possible use to Manning. By dint of perseverance David reached the key, and grasped it firmly between his teeth; then he rose up and staggered towards the door. The lamp glimmered fitfully, but there was still light enough to enable him to see the keyhole. Again he fell on his knees, not to intercede for the mercy and blessing of heaven, that he had forfeited all hope of, but that he might see the light of day once more, and not die a miserable, wretched and horrid death in the lonely and solitary ice-house; but as he was about to bend his head on one side, the better to put the key in the lock, it dropped from it, and fell to the ground. As he stooped down to pick it up again he was conscious of an unaccountable rigid sensation in his jaws, his face became numbed, and all its muscular action departed from it, his teeth clenched themselves together. Alarmed at these indications of something unusual either being about to happen or happening in his system, he made an effort to pick up the key. His lips touched the ground; he tried to open his mouth, but it obstinately refused to move. He attempted it again and again, but with no better success; he could not open his mouth. Do what he could he was powerless to move it. He was lock-jawed. When this awful truth forced itself upon him he lay down full length upon the floor and whined piteously. With his enemy vanquished, with the means of liberty after all his

cleverness and fertility of invention a moment ago within his grasp, now annihilated, he felt that the vengeance of an Almighty Providence had overtaken him red-handed. The lamp flared up and burnt brightly for a quarter of a minute, showing the bodies of the dead and the living soon to be both in the icy embrace of death in the sepulchral vault which chance had converted into a tomb; then it subsided and went suddenly out. With the extinguishing of the light hope left the formerly sanguine mind of David Manning; he gave himself up for lost, and he was sensible enough to know that he could not live long. The blood still flowed in a weary, sluggish stream from his wounds, and he grew gradually weaker and weaker until he became too imbecile to curse, too childish to blaspheme; but as the time approached when his dissolution could no longer be staved off or averted he became terribly alarmed. There was with him a terrible looking for of fiery indignation and of judgment, and he cowered in the darkness, black and sombre, of his prison-house before the anticipation of punishments beyond the grave and beyond the power of man to inflict. As the time flew by the wretched man's terror increased beyond the power of description. The film of insanity which had, as long as Mr. White lived, obscured his mental vision passed away, and he saw things as they are and as he too much feared they would be. His end was a fearful one; and when his stained soul took its flight from the den of sin and strife and murder in which it had hovered, all was bright and sunshiny without.

The rooks were cawing to one another and organizing some raid against the fat lands around them, the wood-pigeon and the ring-dove circled in the air, and the cattle drowsily cropped the rich and luscious herbage; but within the ice-house the gentleman and his murderer, both cut off before their time, lay in all the naked hideousness of a violent death; and as yet no one was aware that a terrible tragedy had been perpetrated within the domain of Appleton—one which would make the village gossips hold their breath for many a long day afterwards.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A VARIETY OF INCIDENTS.

For many days Charles White's life hung in the balance, but by judicious treatment on the part of his medical advisers, and the kind and attentive nursing of Bell, he was snatched from the brink of the grave, and began slowly to recover. Then set in that weary period which has to elapse after a serious illness, during which the patient is so thankful for the least consideration. The half-hour spent by his bedside in a casual visit, the little present of fruit, or the last new book, are all thought so much of. To feel yourself hopelessly chained to one spot, and to know that you are thoroughly dependent on others, is a reflection that will humble the proudest spirit.

Bell did not go away when Charles White began to hold up his head again. She sent into the country for Betsy, telling her to shut up the house at Little Ridge, and she took up her abode at the hotel. She determined to do what she could for the suffering man, and she performed her self-imposed task nobly. She was certainly much puzzled and astonished at first at not hearing from Mr. Weston White. There could be no doubt that the squire had received her message; when did a telegraphic message ever miscarry. Why, then, did he not come? There had

been no quarrel that she was aware of between father and son, and even if there had been, Mr. White would scarcely be inhuman enough to retain his animosity in such a dreadful moment as the present, when the angel of death had been encompassing the young man with its sable wings for many days. She did not know of the dreadful tragedy which had taken place at Appleton, nor, strange to say, did the servants and dependents in the service of the squire. He was missed, of course, but no one thought much of it. It was rumoured that he had received a telegraphic message, and it was surmised he had gone up to town in obedience to some sudden summons. But when a week elapsed, and no tidings were heard of him, when no letter was received from him by the butler, the bailiff, nor even Mrs. Brown, who still held her post as confidential adviser and housekeeper to her master, suspicions became aroused, and inquiries were set on foot. The clerks at the bank were at a loss how to account for Mr. White's neglect. He was his own manager, and generally attended to business with the utmost punctuality. Such a thing had never occurred before. Vague rumours began to circulate, and it was hinted that foul play had been employed. Letters were despatched to Mr. Charles by Mrs. Brown informing him of the state of affairs; but as he had left his hotel in the Isle of Wight without saying where he was going to, the letters never reached him. People met together in the market-place at Appleton, and shook their heads, and adjourned to the public-house to talk the matter over with the

help of a pot of ale. Oddly enough, Bell Wilson's name became a prominent topic of conversation, and it was whispered by some that Farmer Wilson had revenged his loss upon the squire. Every one believed Charles White to have been the seducer of Bell, and they charitably imagined Farmer Wilson had allowed his misfortune to prey upon his mind to such an extent as to have disordered his intellect and led him into crime. So all the ponds were dragged, and all the woods and coverts and gorses searched, but without success. Ten days elapsed, and still no tidings were heard of the squire. At the expiration of that time the justices of the peace at Appleton, in solemn conclave assembled, unable to resist the popular clamour any longer, or remain deaf to what had been in everybody's mouth for some time past, issued a warrant for the arrest of George Wilson, farmer, of Oak Tree.

He was much changed since we saw him last. His back was bent, and he walked with a stick. His hair was thinner, and what he had left of it was grayer and more silvery. He went about his work in a plodding way, as if he did not care how it was done. If it had not been for his wife, who bore up much better than he did, he would have sunk altogether. They never went to church now; formerly they were constant in their attendance, and Wilson was sure to form one of the group of men who made a point of standing in the churchyard, near the porch, gossiping and chatting until the parson came over from the rectory, which stood on the other side of the road. It was five o'clock when

they came to take him to gaol. He had come home from ploughing in one of his fields, and was sitting in the chimney corner, looking moodily into the fire, while his wife busied herself in making tea. The two constables who were deputed to execute the warrant had, like a snowball, picked up an aggregation of particles on their way, in the shape of a man here and a man there, until nearly a dozen were assembled outside the farmhouse door. To their noisy summons for admittance the farmer replied—

"Come in."

The constables entered, but the aggregation of particles remained outside, from a feeling of delicacy, and thinking that their intrusion would not be quite justifiable under the circumstances. Without any prelude the senior officer of the expedition exclaimed, in a loud voice, as soon as he was fairly inside the room—

"I arrest you, George Wilson, in the Queen's name, and by lawful authority, delegated by her Most Gracious Majesty to the justices of the peace at Appleton, on suspicion of being concerned and implicated in the murder of Squire Weston White."

George Wilson rose from his chair, and without a word went over to where his wife was standing open-mouthed at this extraordinary intelligence. He kissed her on her cheek, and said, in a tremulous voice—

"Thee knowst my innocence. Keep up your spirits. It be a heavy blow to be accused of the crime of murder in my old age, but I can bear it, lass.

It'll may be hasten me on the road I've been going uncommon fast these few months past, and if it wornt for thee I shouldn't ha' said nay."

Mrs. Wilson fell back in a chair and buried her face in her apron, and sighed and moaned and cried as if her speedy dissolution might be expected.

One of the constables held some handcuffs in his hand. Going up to his colleague, he said—

"Must us clap these on?"

Being of a kindly disposition, the other replied in the negative, so that indignity was spared the old man.

The aggregation of particles softened at the sight of the grey hairs, when they appeared outside the house.

"I be sorry for thee, Mr. Wilson," cried one.

"I think they ha' got t' wrong man," said another, and other exclamations of a similar nature saluted the old man's ears.

He smiled sadly, but he remarked that no one pressed up to him to shake him by the hand, as they would have done at any other time. He felt that the taint of blood was upon him, and he felt all the bitter ignominy of his position. The gaol at Appleton was situated in the High-street, leading to the market-place. It was a small building, whose plain exterior was embellished over the door, which was reached by a flight of steps, with some chains curiously crossed, and looking terrible and gibbety. To get to the gaol the party had to cross the market-place. Owing to some poaching cases the petty sessions was prolonged far beyond

its usual time, and the court had not yet risen. A large crowd had assembled round the court-house door, and people were eagerly talking to one another, as if discussing some strange event. What this extraordinary occurrence was was speedily made manifest. Some people on the outskirts of the crowd perceived George Wilson and his captors, and setting up a shout, surrounded them, and compelled them to move in the direction of the court. The constables remonstrated, but without avail. They were obliged to obey the dictates of the popular will; resistance was useless. Wilson was much alarmed; he thought that the public were convinced of his guilt, and were going to take the law into their own hands, and either tear him to pieces or string him up to the nearest lamp-post. But he was agreeably mistaken. Loud cheers rang out upon the evening air, as the crowd made way for him to pass, and tumultuously carried him into the justice-room. Standing on the floor of the court was Mrs. Brown. The clerk was taking her deposition. George Wilson listened with the utmost astonishment to what she was saying. Early that morning, she deposed, she was talking to the butler about the squire's disappearance. How it was, she did not know; but she suddenly thought of the ice-house.

"Perhaps," she exclaimed, "master's been and locked himself in, and can't get out again! Well, we must have been flats not to think of that before."

At first the butler ridiculed the idea, but, after a

bit, the other servants were called in, and it was agreed that they should take implements and tools such as were requisite for forcing in the door, and go to the ice-house and settle the question one way or the other. The door was soon forced open, lights obtained, and the most wonderful, and at the same time, fearful sight lay before them. Close to the door was the body of David Manning. The features were perfectly recognisable, although the work of corruption had begun. The squire's body, with the rope round his neck, plainly indicating how he had died, next claimed their attention. Several of the women-servants fainted. Sending to the hall for a horse, one of the grooms rode over to Appleton and informed the police. The door was then carefully shut, and two men left outside to guard it.

She was asked a few insignificant questions by the bench, and then told to stand down. Others having deposed to the same facts, the case was adjourned to the next day. Every gentleman on the bench perfectly recollected the feud between the squire and the poacher, and there was very little doubt, in the judicial mind, that Mr. Weston White was the victim of David Manning. The court was about to rise. The clerk called their attention to the fact of a warrant having been issued for the apprehension of George Wilson on suspicion. He presumed that there would be no objection raised to cancelling that. At this, George Wilson exclaimed in a firm voice, that he was ready to answer any charge that might be brought

against him. The chairman replied that it was unnecessary. The bench were perfectly satisfied, and regretted that Mr. Wilson should have been put to the annoyance and trouble which, through unavoidable circumstances, had arisen. Mrs. Brown here stepped forward and spoke a few hurriedly-whispered words to the clerk, who got up and said—

"Please your worship, Martha Brown, the housekeeper at Appleton Hall, has an important communication to make."

"Let her be heard," said the chairman, with the utmost self-denial, considering that he dined at seven, had four miles to go in his brougham, and it was now half-past.

Mrs. Brown, with some stammering and hesitation, said that to her knowledge David Manning had made an entry into the ice-house on a former occasion, some months back.

"How did she know it?"

"Why, she went to the ice-house one morning about four o'clock."

"What for?"

"By her master's orders; and she saw a hole in the ceiling through which, her master told her, David Manning had entered."

"What particular business took her there?"

Mrs. Brown was silent. The curiosity of the people in court went up ten degrees.

"You have volunteered a statement, Martha Brown," said the chairman, "and I must beg you to give an explicit answer to my question, so that the naked truth shall be laid before the court."

Seeing no escape from her dilemma, Mrs. Brown replied, boldly—

"Well, my poor dear master's dead now. While he lived no torture would have got it from me, but it don't matter now. You see, sir, there was some one in the ice-house, and the squire thought David Manning would know too much, so he sent for me, and told me to take her up to London by the first train."

"Her! Whom do you mean?"

"Bell Wilson," replied the housekeeper, adding to herself—"There, now, the murder's out, and they can't hang me for it."

"What's that?" cried the farmer, painfully excited at the mention of his daughter's name.

Forcing his way up to where Mrs. Brown was standing, he grasped her by the arm, and conjured her to tell him all she knew. She confessed then that she had abducted Bell Wilson at the squire's special request; that Bell had been shut up in the ice-house till David Manning found her out; that she took her up to London and lost her at the railway-station.

Farmer Wilson threw her from him as if she had been something leprous and unclean, and made his way out of court with his head hanging down. The bench rose, and Appleton had something worth talking about that evening. Such a concatenation of marvellous and appalling incidents had occurred as had never been known before. When Farmer Wilson reached his home, he found, to his great surprise, Tom Thorburn there. Tom had been

accused of assaulting Charles White with intent to do him grievous bodily harm, and the young squire had been asked by the police to prosecute, which he refused to do. There being no prosecutor, Tom was discharged; although had Charles White appeared against him, he would have been imprisoned for three months under the Aggravated Assaults Act. So Tom was lucky in getting off with a whole skin. When he heard what Bell's father told him, he was more surprised than ever, and he began to think he had accused Charles White wrongfully after all. George Wilson, on hearing that his daughter was in London, at once declared that he would go and see her, and hear the "rights" of everything from her own lips.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MAKING LOVE.

After some time had elapsed, delicacy suggested to Bell Wilson that her presence by the bedside of Charles White might, if continued any longer, be misinterpreted. While in a state of insensibility, scarcely able to move his head, and not able to speak, she had done the work of a good and kind and an angelic woman, but now the position of affairs was assuming a different aspect. Her patient was becoming stronger; he kicked aside his crutches, and he cut his leading strings in two; he could wrap himself in flannel, and sit on an arm-chair of peculiarly easy construction; he even took a slight interest in the morning paper, and one day, while glancing over the matrimonial announcements, he had been heard to say, "Poor fellow! Got married has he. Suppose it'll happen to me some day." These were signs and portents like the rustling of the wind amongst the leaves and branches of the trees, the grazing of sheep, and the swift sweep of clouds across the sky, which indicate a storm.

So Bell thought that her task was ended, and she might go. She made all her preparations without telling him or letting him have the least inkling of what she was about to do. Her boxes were corded and locked. She paid her bill, for she was able

now to write her own cheques—thanks to the kind munificence of Lady Shorncliffe, who no doubt, in making her bequest, thought she was doing what her son would have done, and what would consequently be acceptable to his departed spirit, which she would probably encounter in the strange world towards which she was journeying. It was necessary that she should take leave of him, though, and she sought his chamber for the last time. He was sitting up in his bed, propped upon pillows, with her old red shawl over his shoulders. She had covered him with it in the days of his need and his extremity, and had not thought to ask him for it back again. He held a pomegranate in his hand, from which he was picking and eating the seeds with great gusto. When he saw Bell he threw his glance upon her. His head was still wrapped in bandages, which gave him the appearance of a turbaned Turk.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "how are you this morning? I am so glad you have come. You are the only gleam of sunshine I have."

"That will not last you long," she replied.

"Not last me long!"

"No; I must go back again to Little Ridge."

"Must you, really?" said Charles White, as his countenance fell and assumed a blank expression.

"Indeed I must. I have so many things to look after which I cannot neglect any longer," replied Bell, in a plain, straightforward manner.

"I had hoped that you would have stayed a little longer," he said, sorrowfully; "but I have no right

to ask you to do so. You have behaved with great kindness—with the greatest kindness to me, and I am sure I ought to be the last to grumble."

"I should be very glad to stay," exclaimed Bell, "till this time next year, if I thought I could be of any further use to you; but I am happy to say that you are getting on so well that I should only retard the cure I want to see accomplished."

"Oh, no, do not say that! If those are your ideas I shall begin to wish I had never began to mend. I shall try and get a relapse, and then you must nurse me over again."

Bell's eyes sought the carpet. Charles White spoke in a more impassioned manner than mere gratitude warranted. The perceptions of women are keen, much more so than men are apt to think them; and Bell imagined she detected a tenderness in Charles White's manner and a softness in his tone which would have only been justifiable between a lover and his affianced. She was pained at this—pained because she knew Charles White to be an excellent fellow, and because she could not return his affection. He was worthy of a woman's heart, of her love, of her devotion, but she could not give him any one of the three, much less all three together; and they are seldom of any use when divided. She might, however, have been mistaken. He had not spoken decidedly; she fervently hoped she had.

"If you take care of yourself," she said, "you will not have a relapse; there is not the least chance of it. Besides, why should you wish it? I have looked after you while you have been ill, be-

cause I felt it was my duty to do so, and because you got hurt through me; but when I am gone you will find plenty of people who will take quite as much care of you as me."

"It may be so," he answered; "but it will not be the same thing. If you give me a glass of water I think it is a cup of nectar. If——"

"You must not talk to me like that, Mr. White," interrupted Bell. "In the first place it is not right, and in the next you will excite yourself and make yourself ill again."

"But I will talk to you," he cried.

Bell cast a look at him so full of indignation at this outburst, that he repented of his precipitation, and said—

"Forgive me my hastiness, will you, dear Miss Wilson? Since you have been so kind as to attend upon me, I have been so grateful for your solicitude, that the bare idea of your going away almost kills me."

"I could do you no more good by staying," said Bell.

"Yes, you could; indeed you could."

"In what way?"

As she spoke she simulated curiosity, although she knew perfectly well what he would say.

"You put the question so plainly to me," he replied, "that you must not be offended if I answer in an equally plain manner. I hope you will not laugh at me, or think I am interested by mercenary motives, or that I am jesting. I have so narrowly escaped the portals of the grave that I am not in the least in the humour for levity. I know, from

what I have heard and from what you have told me, that you are well off; but if you were simply Bell Wilson, the daughter of the farmer of Oak Tree, without a penny-piece in the world, I would say what I am going to say now."

A few tears forced themselves into Bell Wilson's eyes. She did not feel as Isaac Walton, of piscatorial memory, did when he was spitting a frog on his hook; her emotion was of a deeper and more genuine kind.

"I will gladly marry you," he continued, "if you will have me. I shall be well off when my father dies." (He did not even suspect that he was already mouldering in the cold clay of the churchyard.) "At present I have enough to live upon; but I love you, my dear Bell. You will allow an invalid to take a liberty, will you not? You do not mind my calling you Bell? I love you, and I will make you my wife. I am afraid my offer is scarcely worth your acceptance, and I hardly dare tell you how much depends upon your answer. I have been upon the point of speaking to you for some time past, but I delayed it from day to day. You have forced my confession from me by telling me so abruptly of your departure."

Bell listened to what he had to say with patience, if not with self-command. While he was speaking she was agitated; but when he had finished, by exercising great control, she was outwardly as calm and as cold as an icicle, but as she proceeded some warmth was noticeable in her manner. She went up to his bedside, and, looking at him unflinchingly, while his eyes fell before her glance, said—

"I cannot tell you, Mr. White, how sorry I am that this conversation should have taken place between us. It never should, could I have prevented it; but, believe me, I never dreamt of such a thing. I should as soon have thought of Snowdon running from its base and tumbling into the Thames, as your making me an offer. I can see that you mean what you say, and I feel deeply sensible of the honour you intend doing me; but if you will just listen to a chapter of my history you will, I am sure, respect the motives that make me look coldly upon your proposal. After I left Warwickshire I had to encounter a great many hardships, but during my residence in London I met a man to whom I devoted my whole existence, who engaged my entire soul and being. My love for him was as near an approach to idolization as I was capable of making it, but Heaven was pleased to step between us and take him away from me."

"Is he dead?" asked Charles White.

Bell's sobs were the only answer he received. The reminiscence opened the floodgates of her grief, which had only been imperfectly closed before, and she shed an abundance of tears. He tried to assuage her grief, but without avail. At last he gave up the attempt, for his own sorrow was absorbing enough. He understood what she meant by telling him what she had just recited. He was fully aware that she loved the man over whose memory she was now weeping hot and scalding tears. Sinking back upon the pillows which supported his head, he closed his eyes to prevent their moisture being

noticed, and left Bell to speak. She recovered herself sooner than he expected. The violent demonstrations of women are always transient and evanescent from their very nature.

"Yes," she replied, "he is dead, and you will understand my meaning when I say that I feel alone in the world—that I revere his memory too much ever to marry again. The wound is green now; what my ideas may be after the lapse of time I cannot say, but at present I could not love again. I love a phantom, a shade, an unsubstantial reminiscence."

This was perfectly true, Bell loved Lord Shorncliffe's memory. It was, as she said, shadowy and unsubstantial, but still she loved it fondly, fervently, and with her whole heart. It caused her much pain to refuse Charles White, but with her at that time to have contracted a marriage with anybody, would have been nothing short of sacrilege—a crime deep and hideous, a profanation of the dead; and such profanity was abhorrent to her nature—one tenacious, affectionate, and too prone to cling to old associations. It would have been better for her if she could have cut away all the dead wood, the withered branches, and shrivelled leaves which were clogging the tree of her heart; if by one strong energetic blow she could have swept all this withered useless mass into the furnace and have seen it consumed—but rotten though the bulwark was, she adhered to it pertinaciously, and with more steadfastness than was either right or proper. There was no question about Charles

White being painfully in earnest in the declaration he had made; it was only necessary to look in his face to tell that he spoke without reservation, or a scintillation of deception. He had felt himself attracted towards Bell from the first time he had seen her since she left the country. He often thought of that day when in the Isle of Wight it was his good fortune to save her from a miserable death. It very frequently happens that when you have done anything a good turn, or rendered anybody a service, you begin to take an interest in them—to look upon them as your property almost. A man picks up a dog with a broken leg in the street, carries it home and looks to its hurt. It gets well at last, and its preserver always regards that dog with great solicitude; although its actual intrinsic worth may not amount to the value of half-a-crown. So it was with Charles White; he began to entertain tender feelings for Bell, which, instead of checking, he cherished and nursed until they grew too strong for annihilation; had he trampled the sparks out at first, they would never have dilated into a flame. But there is a fascination about a woman when she stands by your sick-bed and ministers to you when you are unable to help yourself. You are weak and lackadaisical, a piece of softened clay ready to receive impressions, a lump of potter's earth to be moulded into anything sentiment may decree. Charles White saw from Bell's dejected air, combined with her decided manner of speaking, that there was no hope for him. Yet, with a singular obstinacy, he thought

he should like to hear his fate from her own lips; it would only give him pain to hear the emphatic "No" that he was aware was trembling on her tongue—but he provoked it. It was the act of the criminal who insists upon ringing his own death-knell.

"Is there no hope, dear Bell?" he asked, in a husky voice, the result of feverish excitement—"will you not change your mind when time has blotted out that image so inimical to myself?"

"Time will never do that," replied Bell, sadly. "Time may tone down events and draw a curtain over the skeleton, but I shall always know that the dreadful thing is there."

"Why have you made me get well," he cried, petulantly, "only to tell me this? Why did you stay with me? You might have known that your engaging manner, your pretty face, your gentle ways, your silvery voice, that everything about you would make me love you. It was not kind—I do not thank you for what you have done."

He spoke with the impatience of an invalid. Bell felt hurt at his unkind way of talking to her. If he did love her, she had not led him on. She did not wish him to do so. It was wrong of him to make use of such expressions; and she told him so.

"Whatever I may have done, I do not deserve this," she said. "I did my best to bring you back to life when you were at death's door; but that is a thing I would rather not talk about. You may think I want to glorify myself, and make out a claim upon you. I am very sorry you love me. I

would give worlds if you did not. It is a great misfortune for both of us. It only adds to my misery to think of what you are suffering. I cannot tell what I have done, but I seem to be like a blight. Something happens to everybody with whom I come in contact."

Bell, overcome by this painful reflection, held a handkerchief to her eyes to check her falling tears.

Recalled to himself by her words, and seeing the impropriety he had been guilty of, Charles White caught her by the hand, and exclaimed with vehemence—

"Will you forgive me? Can you? I am nearly distracted by the thought that I shall never succeed in winning you. If you had given me any hope—if ever so little—it would not have been so bad. It is enough to drive me mad to think of losing so much perfection; but I will be calm—I will not say anything more to worry you, only my grief makes me childish."

Bell did not attempt to withdraw her hand. It pleased him to hold it, and she had not the heart to deprive him of so slight a pleasure. Half a minute passed in this way—he gazing rapturously up in her face, she stemming the torrent of tears which welled from her heart. While they were thus grouped, the door opened unceremoniously—without the slightest preliminary knock—and a man walked into the room. They both started. Bell hastily withdrew her hand. Charles White tore his eyes away and confronted the new comer. The blood rushed to his face; for he was angry at so

unwarrantable an intrusion. But when he recognised the stranger, he merely said—

"I am glad he has come."

Bell trembled a good deal, then advanced a few steps, and said—

"Father."

George Wilson had come up from Appleton, and was a witness of this strange scene, from which it was so easy to draw an unfavourable inference.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

GEORGE WILSON had sought his daughter, and he had found her. But how? Standing by the bedside of Charles White, with her hand in his, agitated, trembling, and in tears. He had apparently interrupted an important, if not a delicate conversation. But he did not allow himself to dwell on this. His face wore an earnest, almost solemn appearance. Pushing his daughter gently but firmly on one side, he walked up to Charles White. He said—

"I be main sorry, Mr. White, but I ha' bad news for thee."

What could it be? A thousand surmises and suspicions floated through the young man's mind. Settling at last upon his father as the only being in whom he was interested, and of whom George Wilson could bring him any tidings, he exclaimed—

"My father! Has the bank broken? Has——"

He could say no more, his agitation choked him.

"T' squire be dead," replied Wilson, abruptly.

He was so full of his engrossing intelligence that he did not think of the weak state in which Charles White was. He did not reflect that what he had to say, if not said with the greatest care, might have the most disastrous consequences. In his

blundering, rustic fashion, he blurted out what was as good as a deathblow to Charles White in his low and nervous condition.

"How—how did he die?" he gasped.

"It be a sad business, Mr. Charles," said the farmer. "David Manning, t' poacher, killed him—strangling him with a rope. But there had been a fight, and Manning he was cut across t' hands, and he bled to death. I went to see t' bodies, and he wor washered (wet-shod) in his own blood. It wor a awful sight, Mr. Charles, a awful sight, such as God send I may never see again. I never ha' seen one loike it in all my born days, and —— But there, it wor awful."

"What!" cried Charles White. "Killed! Hanged like a dog by a poacher! When? How?"

He sank back upon the pillow from which he had raised himself during his excitement, and caught his breath like a man with the asthma.

"Don't, father, don't," said Bell—"don't say any more to him."

She was fearful of the consequences of such a terrible communication.

"Let me be, lass," cried the farmer. "It wor this way, Mr. White. T' squire had gone into t' ice-house, David Manning got in arter him, and they wor both found dead."

The young man seemed to have reserved his strength in order to hear how the catastrophe he so much deplored had been brought about. But it was a final effort, for the farmer had no sooner ceased speaking than his eyes closed, his respiration

apparently stopped, and he bore every resemblance to a corpse.

"What have you done?" exclaimed Bell. "You have killed him. Stand on one side; let him have air."

She rang the bell for assistance, and sent for the doctor who had attended him ever since his accident. When he came he said gravely that a shock had been sustained by the nervous system of the patient, which would most probably result in brain fever. He thought it better that the room should be cleared, as the sight of Bell and her father would only make the young man worse if he were suddenly to return to consciousness. So the farmer, accompanied by his daughter, went away, and sought the privacy of the sitting-room Bell occupied in the hotel. Bell was the first to speak.

"What you have told me, father, about the squire's death is very horrible. It seems a just visitation, though, for what he attempted to do. How strange that he should have met his death in the very place in which he shut me up!"

The farmer made some remark, the effect of which was, that although the squire was dead, he seemed to have left his affection for Bell as a legacy to his son. He spoke bitterly, and Bell promptly replied—

"I need not disguise from you the fact that Charles White loves me. After what you saw, such concealment would be not only foolish but useless. But I can assure you that I do not in any way return his feeling."

"Why not, wench?" demanded her father. "There be many things in a' this that beat I."

Bell let her lashes fall over her eyes at first, but summoning up her resolution, and thinking it better that the old man should know everything at once, she resolved to tell him all without any reservation.

"Sit down, father," she exclaimed, "and listen to me. I will tell you what has happened to me since I went away from home."

"That's it. That be what I want to know," he replied, disposing himself upon a chair, and leaning his cheek upon the big knob of his heavy stick.

"Mrs. Brown, who is a bad woman, took me away, and I was shut up in Squire Weston's ice-house."

The old man nodded his head, as if he would say he was aware of the fact.

"David Manning found me out, and was going to liberate me, when the squire detected his plan, and sent me up to London. I ran away from Mrs. Brown at the station, and after wandering about London I got employment at a milliner's in Regent-street. Here I met with a young gentleman with whom I fell in love."

She lowered her voice as she came to this part of the story.

"Lord Shorncliffe was also much attached to me, but he died before he could marry me."

"Dang me if I didn't think that wor a coming," exclaimed George Wilson, stamping one of his heavy boots on the floor.

"Do not interrupt me," resumed Bell. "I have

not much to tell now. After his death I gained my living in an honest manner, and no one can say a word against me. Soon after Lady Shorncliffe, his mother, followed him to the grave; but before she died she left me some property. I lived in the Isle of Wight because I did not like to return to you—and one day I should have been drowned if Mr. White had not saved my life. When he recognised me he told me how he was suspected of carrying me off, and begged me to come up to town to clear his reputation. I consented to do so, but as ill luck would have it, we met Tom Thorburn in the street, and he saw me with, as he thought, the man who had brought all the trouble upon you and himself. He attacked him and nearly killed him. I being with him felt bound to wait upon him, and do my best for him. I thought this morning that my mission was ended, and I was about to return into the country, when Mr. White made me an offer, which I refused. Our interview was just drawing to an end when you came into the room. That is all—I have nothing more to tell you."

"It be all darned strange," said George Wilson. "But one thing I see plain enow. Thee beest a black sheep, Bell; I hearn it out of your own mouth."

"If I have done wrong," she said, "it is not for you to reproach me."

"Mebbe not. But I be your feather."

"I cannot help what I have done," she replied. "Oh, I wish I was dead! every one seems to be against me."

"It be no great matter to me," he observed. "I haven't got long to stop this side o' the grave. I thought I should like to see you once afore I died. Thee wast loike a foine lily out of t' garden down at whoam; now thee beest a lily wi' a bag o' soot emptied on it. It be hard upon I—cruel hard. I be nothing but a common yearmer; but, dang it, I ha' my own idays. I ha' allways kept myself and t' ole woman down at Oak Tree in the ruts, and it be hard as you should ha' got out of 'em. Still thee beest my darter, and I wunna drive thee away from me. Come, wench, I forgive 'ee. It be all over now."

Bell went to him, and fell sobbing on his breast. It was an affecting sight to see the father and daughter as they stood, their tears mingling together, and their hearts beating in unison. The old Warwickshire farmer, the son of the soil, loved his child, and he was glad to get her back again at any price—he would rather have her as she was, than not have her at all. After all, his weakness was an amiable one. Why should a man drive his girl away from his door, into the very street it may be, because she has listened to a man's lies? It is not natural for anyone to war against his own flesh and blood. Bell's heart was full, as her father pressed her to his breast, and his forgiveness gratified her more than she could find words to express. He asked her if she would return to Oak Tree with him. Tom, he said, was as much her slave as ever, and would be delighted to see her; but she shook her head sadly.

"No," she replied, "I will not go back to the farm, father; to see Tom Thorburn; I would go to see you and mother, but I might raise hopes and expectations in Tom's mind which I can never gratify. I have too much respect for him to place him in so unpleasant a position. I regret his rastiness with regard to Mr. White, but I can make some slight excuse for his conduct on that occasion. He was under the impression that the young squire—you know we always used to call him the young squire, and I like old familiar phrases—had taken me away from Appleton, and t was only natural, under those circumstances, that he should feel aggrieved, for I am perfectly sure that Tom loved me."

"He did that," observed the farmer, positively.

After some further conversation they separated, Bell promising to come down to Appleton provided she should not be brought in contact with Tom Thorburn. George Wilson declared that if she would visit the old woman and himself Tom should never come near her. She said she should stop a day or two in town before she paid the promised visit, because she had certain things to settle and arrange. After her father had gone away, Bell made inquiries as to the state of Mr. White's health, and she was told that he was slightly better. She was rejoiced to hear this; she thought it would be a dreadful thing for the son to follow the father so quickly. George Wilson had not long left the hotel before Betsy came in. With characteristic gravity she sat herself down upon a chair, and sighed.

"What is the matter, Betsy?" asked her mistress.

"I'm thinking about my poor dear husband," replied Betsy.

"You have never told me anything about him," said Bell.

"Ah! he was a good sort," exclaimed Betsy. "His name was Brown—I know it's a common one, but I've always felt thankful that it wasn't either Smith, Jones, or Robinson—I can't abear Smith. But Brown was a dear, good soul. Once I had a swelling in my foot. He was a groom in Lord Liftover's service—him as hunts the Pytchley—and he used to call it a lump in my off leg, and kept on saying he'd send me to a veterinary surgeon. Well, the advice I had about that swelling you wouldn't believe; one doctor says, 'Just let me make an incision, and it'll come out.' 'What'll come out?" I says. 'Why, what's in,' he says. Well, he made the incision, and put a poultice on, but nothing ever came of it. At last Brown took me in hand; 'Females is like horses,' was his words, 'and I think I'll try a little horse doctoring here.' So he goes feeling about, and feeling, till he comes to something; one good squeeze, and out it came—half a needle, my dear; been in ever so long. Suppose I had half a needle in my foot now, who is there to take it out for me? And yet he made a hard will—a cruel will. He died worth five-and-twenty pounds, all made in service, and he left it to hospitals—I never got a penny."

"That was very sad," said Bell.

This was the first and the only glimpse Bell ever got of Betsy's former life, for the old lady preserved a judicious reticence upon the subject, which it was difficult, if not impossible, to make her set aside. When Bell laid her head upon her pillow that night, she thought over all that had recently taken place. She was gratified by the reflection that she had made her peace with her father, for she held the old man in great respect and veneration, and it pleased her to think that the load of grief and sorrow he had formerly been groaning over had been removed. The awful death of Mr. Weston White shocked her beyond measure; she considered that the wrong he had endeavoured to do her had heavily recoiled upon himself. If he had not confined her in the ice-house, in all probability he would not have made so great an enemy of David Manning, and the catastrophe which eventually befel him would never have taken place. The father dead, the son dying! Verily it seemed as if a curse had lighted upon the house, launched by the unerring hand of fate. It was a fall, sudden and complete. A prosperous family was annihilated and swept off the face of the earth, and all in a brief space, without any premonition. When she sank to sleep her dreams were troubled, and she slept badly. She was afflicted with a sort of nightmare—that nocturnal visitor to the mentally uneasy, and the dyspeptic. She thought herself on the brink of a precipice, over which all her friends were tumbling, but, although she had the greatest inclination and desire to follow them, she was un-

able to do so. She woke up out of this restless slumber with a start; there was a light in the room, and she was surprised to see Betsy standing by the bed, with a candle in her hand.

"I thought the light would wake you," she exclaimed. "I've never known it to fail. It's the best plan to rouse anybody as sleeps hard, as ever I heard of."

"What is it?" asked Bell, shading her eyes, for the light of the candle hurt them.

"They want you upstairs," replied Betsy, indicating a room over head by a movement of her hand.

"Is he worse?" exclaimed Bell, anxiously.

"At his last gasp, they say. Poor young gentleman. A nice smooth-spoken young man as I ever came across. I speak as I find."

"Never mind that," interrupted Bell, impatiently. "How you worry one by talking. Bring me my slippers. I will soon slip on my things."

Betsy did as she was requested, in this respect, but in the other she had her own way; the garrulous old woman was wound up for a talk, and she had it.

"They say he's calling out for you, and must see you afore he dies. The doctor he kept on hurrying me with, 'Now, my good woman, if you'll only go and bring your mistress, and do your talking afterwards.' Like his impudence; but when I'd said what I wanted to say, I came. They wont believe that old women like me have had a deal of experience. I knew there was no call to hurry. The

poor young man's bound to die—that's right enough; but he wont go off till the turn of the morning—they never do. Bless you, I know all about it. Wasn't I nurse in a hospital, soon after Brown's death, just afore I took to costermongering?"

By this time Bell was ready to go up to Charles White's room. She found the doctor, who had been hastily called up by the nurse, in attendance on the sufferer; he was sitting down on a chair. When Bell entered, he rose, and walking to her on tiptoe, placed his finger on his lips to enjoin silence. A whispered conversation took place.

"Is there any hope?" asked Bell.

"I will not say that there is not," replied the doctor. "He sleeps, but he begged to see you just now, and I took the liberty of sending for you. It is a critical time with him. If he lives through the night, we shall save him. Perhaps the sight of you will soothe the extreme mental irritation under which he is labouring, and which is productive of a similar cerebral annoyance."

Bell took the place the doctor had formerly occupied, and fervently hoping that the young man might not be in so very hopeless a state as he was described, awaited his awakening. He slept for an hour. He woke up suddenly, and his eyes fell with a gratified expression upon her face; he did not speak, but he took her hand between his wasted fingers, and drawing it under the bed-clothes, placed it on his heart. Bell made no opposition to this; she was glad to be instrumental in giving him pleasure in any way. The doctor approached, and

made him swallow an anodyne. The soporific soon took effect, and he once more fell asleep. He did not again wake till broad daylight. All this time Bell had kept her hand upon his heart, and thanked Heaven she could still feel its feeble pulsations. When the doctor took his leave, he said to Bell—

"The danger for the present is over. Let him be kept quiet; keep all exciting news from him, and he may weather it yet."

The grave had yawned in vain, and old Father Time was compelled to turn the hour-glass, while Death, the destroyer, whetted his scythe for another victim.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE RETURN OF THE LOST ONE.

UNUSUAL animation was observable in the neighbourhood of Oak Tree. Things there lately had been very stagnant. It was autumn. The trees had brought forth and were groaning under their produce. The golden and rosy checked apples turned their faces to the sun, and drank in his slanting beams. It was the ambrosia upon which they fed. But although nature had given the farmer an abundance of fruit, he had allowed it to hang upon the boughs, which gracefully descended towards the earth under their ripe freight. No cheese had lately been made by Mrs. Wilson, who contented herself with making a small quantity of butter, which, as usual, she took to market once a week. On the day of which we speak, however, everything seemed to be changed. The farm-labourers were bustling about in the yard, two flails were at work in the barn, and the husks from the corn flew about in a white cloud. The poultry made a great noise, as if they were conscious of some unusual event about to happen, and Mrs. Wilson was scrubbing away inside the house in conjunction with the dairymaid, in a way that gave one positive pleasure to watch her operations.

Presently she went upstairs into the room which had been Bell's before her departure from the scene of her youthful days. Nothing in it had been touched except for the purposes of dusting. The ornaments upon the mantelpiece were still there. The picture of the Crucifixion yet hung on the wall. The geranium, which stood on a stand in one corner, had been carefully tended and watered; and was now in all the glory of its second flowering. The thrush, in its wicker cage, dilated its throat, and sang a song of the woods from whence he came. The articles of wearing-apparel in the drawers had been untouched, and were in precisely the same condition in which she had left them. The Bible and prayer-book stood upon a what-not. A pair of ear-rings, some hair-pins, and a little gold ring set with turquoises were in a glass dish on the dressing table, by the side of the brush and comb, which Bell had been in the habit of using. Her mother often derived a melancholy pleasure from visiting this room, and gazing upon those relics of her lost child. Downstairs, the farmer might have been discovered pacing restlessly up and down—now in the house, now out of it. He could not remain in the same place for five minutes together; he kept on looking up at the sky in a weatherwise manner, hoping the rain would keep off, although there was no more chance of rain than there was of a deluge. Then went into the garden, gathered an apple or two, or a ripe pear, and put them in his pocket, muttering to himself—

"She used to mind a mellow pear."

The bees came in for a share of his attention, and he made a resolve to take the honey in a day or two, of which kind intention the little insects were happily ignorant. Had they been able to divine the thoughts of the worthy old man, who was so carelessly dealing with the destiny of the hive, they would most probably have given him some stinging proofs of their affection. As it was, they buzzed about, and improved the shining hours with their usual industry. The farmyard acted as a magnet for the farmer's footsteps, and he walked about from one place to another, with a smile upon his face, which had been a stranger to it this long while. The men looked up at him, and one of them, as spokesman for the rest, said, respectfully touching his hat—

"Be Miss Bell coom fra' Lunnon yet?"

The farmer shook his head, but added he did not think she would be long first. This was the secret. Bell was expected home, and her prospective arrival had given an impetus to the sluggish stream of Oak Tree life, such as a mighty current like the Gulf Stream gives to the seas through which it passes.

"Hullo!" suddenly exclaimed the farmer, as he went through the rick-yard. "Who's that? Be that Tom? Tom, lad! I say, Tom, lad!"

But he received no answer. The figure George Wilson had seen took refuge behind a stack. It was Tom Thorburn, who, having heard the joyful intelligence that Bell was coming home, had made

his appearance on the scene; but he did not wish any one to know of his presence, hence his running away before the vigilant glance of the farmer. He kept on looking in the direction from whence a fly would have to come from Appleton. He wondered how Bell would receive him. He had every reason to expect coldly, so he wished to feel his way before, like a fool, he rushed in where angels would have feared to tread.

It was about the middle of the day when the sound of wheels was heard, and Bell was seen approaching. The fly drove up, Bell dismounted, and was alternately embraced by her father and mother. Tom Thorburn, like a silly, sheepish fellow, was lurking behind a tree, wondering whether it would ever come to his turn to press Bell to his breast in the same way. Bell did not return home as a Pamela, but she was very welcome, heartily welcome, nevertheless. Mrs. Wilson began to cry, when her husband exclaimed—

"Now, missus, none o' that; we ha' done wi' a' that."

Then they went into the well-known house, where Bell had spent many a happy hour. With great good taste she had dressed herself as plainly as possible, leaving all her silks and satins behind her. She wore a plain stuff dress, surmounted by a common black shawl, and a straw bonnet, with a piece of black ribbon wrapped tastefully round it. Tom crept stealthily up to the window, and peeped in, but he took as much care as he could that no one should see him. After some time had elapsed,

and all sorts of questions had been asked and answered, George Wilson said—

"And how be t' young squire?"

"Have I not told you?" replied Bell. "He is getting on very well indeed, and sails for Madeira next week—when in a year or two, they say, he will be himself again. The hall here is to be shut up, the servants dismissed, and an agent is to manage the bank and the property."

"Well, who'd ha' thought it?" remarked Mr. Wilson, sententiously. "The rigs as we've had down here," said the farmer, "beat cock-fighting, and that's a fact. There's you spirited away; then there's Tom off to Lunnun, and wallopping Mr. Charles; and there's David Manning the poacher hanging the squire, and killing himself in the doing of it; and there's me 'rested for the murder on 'spicion, and now you come back—why it's——"

The farmer broke off in his speech without any warning, and getting up from his chair, he darted through the door. Bell and her mother watched him with curiosity and anxiety—not knowing what his intention was. They heard a scuffle outside—a few indignant remonstrances—and the farmer presently returned with Tom Thorburn, whom he had caught sight of outside the window. The farmer held him tightly by the arm, so that he could not get away, although he would have been very glad to do so. Bell blushed slightly when Tom was thus unceremoniously obtruded upon her notice. She had expected to meet him; but it was not an encounter she would have sought. Had she

been consulted in the matter, she would have avoided it.

"Come and show yourself, you thief of the world!" exclaimed George Wilson to his captive. "There be some one here as you know on—eh, lad?"

The farmer looked at Bell, and winked as he said this. Tom, finding there was no escape for him, made the best of a bad job, and walking up to Bell, shook her by the hand.

"How do, Bell?" he said "Glad to see you back again 'mongst us at t' old place."

Bell replied—

"I don't know that I ought to be friendly with you; but if you are willing to forget everything, I am also."

"Give us thy hand on it!" cried Tom, heartily; and presently they were sitting side by side as amiably as if Bell had never left her home, and Tom Thorburn had never felt aggrieved, and got his poor honest head into a muddle. A happy party was gathered together under George Wilson's roof-tree that night, and the family punch-bowl—made of old fashioned china—never steamed with punch brewed for a more worthy occasion. Bell prolonged her visit to Oak Tree; and it got whispered about that Tom Thorburn had prevailed upon her never to quit the farm again, and that there was every prospect of the Stoke Golding girls, who had set their caps at Tom, being disagreeably disappointed, as it was more than likely that there would be a Mrs. Thorburn before long. It is a saying at Stoke

Golding that the bells of the village church, when they chime, shape themselves into the following words—

"Stoke Golding, Stoke Golding,
Where the boys
Kiss the girls
Without holding."

But as they rang out clearly one evening as Bell was walking in the fields with her old love, Tom did not carry out the truth of the doggrel; for he held her tenderly in his arms as he pressed his lips to hers, and drew an almost inaudible consent from her to become something nearer and dearer to him than he had ventured to hope lately she ever would be, and still the bells kept on saying—

"Stoke Golding, Stoke Golding," with the same merry pertinacity.

THE END.